No-Level Brick Japanese Language Education: Understanding Learning as Participation in Practice through a Communities of Practice Perspective

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Abstract
This study explores one of the aspects—facilitators—of a unique undergraduate Japanese as a foreign language course at an Italian university. Facilitators who are neither teachers nor students have received limited attention to date in the field of foreign language education. This study aims to contribute to scholarly knowledge by providing insight into the experience of peer-facilitators. Communities of practice and situated learning facilitate the context-sensitive exploration of the facilitator learning experience with particular attention to participation and identity. In the course employing dialogic pedagogy, the facilitators assisted dialogic teaching and learning while reflecting upon their facilitation in the facilitator group. They had frequent face-to-face and online interactions and submitted weekly reflection report over a fifteen-week academic semester in 2019—these are the primary data sets of this study. Using thematic analysis, this qualitative case study attempted to reveal the change that the facilitator group underwent and the change which one of the facilitators underwent in the course comprehensively. This study found that the facilitator group shifted its focus from listening to and following the course teacher instructions to discussing their facilitation for the students. The focal facilitator changed his way of participation and identity when his image of a facilitator came to be not an authoritative figure who instructs what the students should do but the supporter who walks along with the students. Drawing on the findings, this study suggests designing a holistic learning environment and reconsidering the attitude to learning outcomes to enrich participatory learning.

Keywords: Facilitator, Communities of Practice, Situated Learning, Participation and Identity, Japanese Language Education

Introduction

This study explores one of the aspects of a unique undergraduate Japanese as a foreign language (FL) course at an Italian university. The focus of this study is placed on experiences of facilitators who are neither teachers nor students in the course. The facilitators were either voluntarily participating undergraduate students, postgraduate students or part-time language teachers of the university. In the course which employed a dialogue approach for Japanese language teaching and learning (e.g. Hosokawa, 2019, Hosokawa, Otsuji & Mariotti, 2016), the facilitators assisted dialogic teaching and learning. Facilitator assistance was enhanced by forming a discussion group and engaging with dialogue about their facilitation regularly face-to-face and online outside the class time. To date, no matter which educational approach is concerned, teachers and/or students are at the center of attention in language education research. Now, the term—facilitator is often used to replace the traditional image of teachers as an authoritative figure with teachers as a less authoritative figure (O'Dwyer, 2006). Therefore, facilitators as not teachers but peers are relatively less touched upon even when previous studies mention them e.g. near-peer role model (Murphy, 1998). Thus, the limited number of studies has explored the experiences of peer-facilitators in the field of FL education. Conducting more studies about such members in FL classrooms can be fruitful for future FL educational design.

This study aims to contribute to scholarly knowledge by providing insight into the experience of peer-facilitators in the above-mentioned course. The experience is explored drawing on Communities of Practice (CoP; Wenger et al., 2002) and its associated concept, Situated Learning (SL; Lave & Wenger, 1991). These allow this study to understand how the facilitators shape the context of their learning and the context shapes their learning—these are mutually constitutive. The data of this study are qualitative—online discussions and weekly reports collected over a fifteen-week academic semester in 2019. Thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) of the data set reveals the change that the facilitator group underwent and the change which one of the facilitators underwent in the course. Drawing on the findings, this study concludes by discussing the importance to design ones' learning as participation in distinct but interconnected communities. It further suggests that a longer-term and process-oriented view is called for to understand the learning through participation in social practice.

Literature Review

This section first provides a theoretical view—CoP (Wenger et al, 2002) and its associated concept SL (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which shapes the understanding of learning in this study. It is important to note that the underlying assumption of CoP and SL contrasts to the so-called acquisitional view of learning—learning as individual practice for cognitive development (Sfard, 1998). Then, the studies informed by the CoP and SL are reviewed to discuss the need for this study.

Theoretical View: Situated Learning and Communities of Practice

The fundamental view of learning in this study is informed by SL. SL is theorized based on the observation of learning in apprenticeship communities e.g. tailors or midwives. For the scholars drawing on this view, learning is not individual but

fundamentally social practice unlike the understanding of scholars drawing on an acquisitional view of learning (Sfard, 1998). They understand that learning occurs when individuals change their ways of participation and accordingly their identity while participating in a context where essential knowledge and skills are embedded. In this participation and identity change, learning and doing are inseparable. Such a learning process is associated with a move from newcomers to competent, contributing and responsible participants of a particular group of people (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The outcomes of such learning coincide with building an effective community which strives to achieve a shared purpose. The quality of this type of learning is enhanced when a community is built and sustained as CoP.

CoP is defined as "a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015, p. 1). CoP is composed of three fundamental elements. *Domain*—a shared concern or passion—drives what the group strives to achieve. *Community* is where they feel a sense of trust, respect and belongings. Regular interaction facilitates relationship and community building. *Practice* is a set of shared ways of doing things that members keep negotiating, developing, and sustaining. They learn how to do what they want to do better by taking part in the practice. When three components orchestrate, a group of people are considered as CoP.

When a group functions as CoP, the participation of its members is encouraged and then their participatory learning is enriched. This theory has impacted how to view learning and how to design learning environment in companies (e.g. Ishiyama, 2018), online platforms (Schlager et al., 2002, Herrington et al., 2006) and educational institutions (e.g. Thomson, 2017). This theory can be also fruitful for FL education like other fields of education. FL learners often have limited occasions to use their FL in the immediate local communities outside their classes (Ortega, 2007). Using insights from SL and CoP studies, FL educational practitioners may better facilitate the opportunities to not just learn but use the FL for their students in their classes.

Studies Informed by Communities of Practice

To date, studies informed by CoP have investigated some cases of classroom language learning. In summary, they have illustrated that the success in participation is associated with the success in learning, and in turn, the failure in participation is associated with the failure in learning (e.g. Lamb, 2013) although this may be a simplistic understanding (e.g. Morita, 2004). Such studies have also discussed environmental factors associated with the success and the failure of participation. In these discussions, scholars started to argue that a classroom does not function as a CoP in its original sense (e.g. Haneda, 2006). It is due to several misalignments between classroom reality and CoP as a theoretical construct e.g. membership makeup, frequency and duration of regular interactions and ways to start and end a group (Kojima & Thomson, 2019). This suggests that more FL education studies informed by CoP may need to address teaching and learning happening outside the institutional classroom settings.

To date, a few studies have explored out-of-class learning using CoP in the field of FL education. These studies suggest that CoP has its explanatory power for out-of-class learning of FL learners (e.g. Shimasaki, 2014, Zappa-Holman & Duff, 2015,

Thomson & Chan, 2017). Further, these studies offer useful insight into pedagogical implications. Nevertheless, studies of individuals like facilitators who are concerned in this study are still scarce in this field. Therefore, this study aims to add a case study of the facilitators who engaged in learning opportunities outside the official university course framework to the relatively unexplored area of scholarly knowledge with a focus on facilitator participatory experience and identity negotiation.

Methodology and Methods

This study is a case study making a qualitative inquiry. As a case study, this study is interested in understanding how the focal case is socioculturally constructed (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Qualitative inquiry enables this study to explore emic views that inform "what is happening, what it means and its significance to the social group" from insider perspectives (Bloome 2012, p. 9). The qualitative data of this study come from two sources—online discussions in the facilitator group and facilitator weekly reflection reports. As the author was not at the research site at the time of data collection, his involvement in the facilitator group was partial, indirect and passive. That is, direct observation was not possible. This study acknowledges that these aspects of data collection are the shortcomings of this study. To overcome these, several emic views are simultaneously accessed through two types of data sources offered by different facilitators. The data were collected over fifteen weeks during an academic semester in 2019.

This study employed thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) to explore how the group of facilitator changed, how the facilitators changed and then how the group and the individual members mutually influenced each other. The SL and CoP together with the purposes of the study guided the inductive analysis. The process-oriented analysis identified seminal themes in the data sets regarding the purpose of the study.

Research Context

The research site of this study is the fifteen-week undergraduate Japanese course for third-year students at an Italian university. The course employing a dialogic pedagogy thematized "my future" as its main focus. The students were requested to ask themselves why their goal or dream in the future would be important to them. Thus, the course did not favor the students saying—"I want to do this in the future as I like it". Asking themselves and others "why" was considered vital for a reciprocal process of thinking, becoming aware and self-discovery. This self-discovery is assumed challenging to achieve individually and thus dialogue was integrated into all aspects of the course. Simultaneously, the dialogue was considered essential for a community building in the course. Without the community building, their dialogue was thought to remain surface-based one. These values were presented in the course for the students but more importantly, actively discussed in the facilitator group. Sixty students initially attended the course and then fifty-one students completed the course. This decrease in the student number is normal at an Italian university where attendance is not compulsory to gain credits from courses.

In the course, the students were asked to develop a report over the semester and give a presentation at the end of the semester. The report included 1) a motivational text—stating the goal or dream in the future and why it is important to them, 2) a dialogue

report—providing extracts of out-of-class dialogue transcript and relating them to their chosen goal or dream and 3) conclusion—stating the change which they underwent through their dialogue. The report was rewritten regularly while repeating in-class dialogue with classmates, the course teacher and the facilitators. The out-of-class two-hour dialogue was designed to facilitate student deeper engagement with their ideas. In week fourteen and fifteen, the student presentations as part of formal evaluation reported the three components to receive further feedback. The feedback was expected to be used for polishing their final reports submitted to the self-, peer- and teacher-evaluation. The students decided the marking criteria of the course on their own in week twelve and thirteen for the evaluation. The 60% of the total mark came from the teacher evaluation and 40% came from peer- and self-evaluation.

Research Participants

The facilitators—the main focus of this study—supported the dialogic teaching and learning by being involved in both teaching and learning as active participants. The total number of facilitators who regularly attended the course was thirteen. Broadly speaking, they had an interest in FL education as they learnt and/or taught Japanese as an FL, Korean as an FL or Italian as a local language at the university. Five were paid-internship students, one wanted to apply the approach to another language taught at the university and the rest wanted to support the teacher, the students and the course. However, it should be noted that the reasons for their voluntary involvement are not fully known—the reasons might have affected how the facilitator community functioned and how each facilitator experienced participatory learning. The facilitators joined one of the groups each of which had four to six students.

In general, the facilitators were those who had experienced the past courses with a dialogic pedagogy. Some of the facilitators were experiencing the pedagogy as the students were. Regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, most of them completed the same activities required for the students to complete. Whilst doing so, they learnt and practiced their facilitation. While such simultaneous learning and practice occurred in the classes, the reflection of their facilitation was encouraged during frequent face-to-face and online discussions, which is the first data set of this study. Nine had an Italian background, two had a Japanese background and one had a Korean background. Their communication during the discussions was either in Italian, Japanese or mixed between these two[1]. In the discussions, the facilitators became increasingly familiar with facilitating dialogic teaching and learning e.g. understanding how to ask questions in a certain way. After every weekly class, they were asked to write a reflective report about the students, their facilitation and the course, which became another data set of this study.

The focal student—Andrea[2]—was Italian and one of the undergraduate students in the facilitator cohort. He had had no experience as a facilitator prior to the course under this study but he had attended a short-term seminar series about the dialogic pedagogy. He led the facilitator group upon the teacher's request, submitted most of the weekly reports and remained active in and outside classes. This leadership, responsible engagement and activeness inform that he assumed himself with a certain level of

[1] These are translated into English by the author.
[2] Pseudonym

familiarity with and knowledge about the pedagogy. Last but not least, he seemed to have the strongest interest in language education among the facilitators. This study explores his experience as a focal facilitator in the course to understand changes in his participation and identity regarding FL education while examining how the community of which he was part shaped his experience.

Findings

Learning Context: the Facilitator Community

The first part of the finding section illustrates the change of the facilitator community. Two excerpts—one at the beginning and another in the middle of the semester exemplifies the change.

During the first few weeks, the facilitators carefully listened to the teacher to comply with what the teacher expected them to do. The interactions among the facilitators seldom occurred. Occasionally, a few facilitators asked questions to the teacher. Even when questions were asked to the teacher, they were mostly to clarify or confirm the intention of the teacher instruction. These are observable in Excerpt 1 below.

Teacher	*Please wait a bit [to read the reports that the students have written]. It will take a bit more time until I decide the group for each facilitator.*
Facilitator A	*Yes, I understand. Can the students who did not attend the class still read them and send [their comments] via email?*
Teacher	*Of course.*

Excerpt 1: Interactions in the facilitator group in week 3

In these weeks, the domain of the facilitator group was to understand the teacher instructions and follow them as expected. Their community was being formed while, whether overtly or covertly, recognizing the authority of the teacher. As a result, the interactions were often limited to the unidirectional ones between each facilitator and the teacher. Their practice was to listen to and confirm to later perform what was told to do.

Several weeks after the semester began, the facilitator group started showing a noticeable change. For example, not only the teacher but also most of the facilitators started to initiate discussions and suggest actions to take. Their discussions often explored the meanings the actions would come to have and whether doing the actions would be necessary. Their primary interest in the discussions appeared to be whether their actions were meaningful for not themselves but the students. They did so frequently even without the teacher. In Excerpt 2 shown below, they concluded that the action proposed to take by one of them (i.e. commenting on the student motivational texts) was unnecessary and thus they decided not to do it. The conclusion was drawn based on the evidence—one of the facilitators checked whether the students had submitted their assignment and confirmed the students did without any instruction from the facilitators.

Facilitator B	*I am sorry but I am confused. What will be the purpose [of commenting on the student motivational text]? I do not see any necessity to comment on the motivational texts today given that the students would not reflect them to their writings. That is, is it that urgent?*
Facilitator C	*If I can rephrase, [by doing so] we can provide topics [by giving comments] for the students who do not know what to write. ... This is my opinion. What do you guys think?*
Facilitator A	*The due is tomorrow, so it may not be urgent. But if we comment on their motivational texts early, they have more time to think of it. So, let's write our comment.*
Facilitator D	*I don't think that we have to be worried too much. When I checked, some students already uploaded their motivational texts and the numbers are increasing. [Regarding submitting an assignment in the last minutes,] aren't you the same? I checked yours just now but you have not uploaded yours.*

Excerpt 2: Interactions in the facilitator group in week 7

At this stage and thereafter, it seems that their domain concerned how they could support the students. More varieties of facilitators expressed opinions and then the community where they could constructively exchange opinions was growing. Further, the practice turned to be initiating actions, asking clarification for the meanings and reasons behind the actions and suggesting what to do or even not to do drawing upon evidence.

Facilitator Experience: The Case of Andrea

Now, this study shifts its focus to Andrea. Observing online discussions, emails and weekly reports informs that he was actively involved in the facilitator group as well as the classes from the beginning to the end of the semester. Such active involvement appeared to lead him to rigorously negotiating and dynamically changing his participation and identity in the course. As evident in the range of emotion seen in his statements presented below, he did not seem to expect such negotiation and change.

In the beginning, he positioned himself as the one who would give instructions to the students in his group. It is evident in his repeated uses of the term—"*Shidōsuru [instruct]"* (11 February) in his weekly reports. Furthermore, over a month, his desire to put the students under his control was evident from the repeated use of causative verbs such as *"Saseru [make]"* in his reports. For instance, he states as follows:

> *"[In] this class [it] is not enough saying 'I like something' but it is challenging to* ***make the students think*** *of what they feel. I came to understand that completing the ultimate goal in our task (****making the students think****) is impossible in one class. ... I also need to* ***make all the students in my group speak up*** *equally. ... They do not listen to my follow up instruction even when they do not understand the teacher instruction. ... How can I* ***make them think****? How can I* ***make them speak up****? How can I interfere further whilst maintaining my group as a comfortable one?"* (11 March, emphasis added by the author)

While his desire to make the students follow his intention—perhaps as he, as a student, attempted to do in the facilitator group—was noteworthy, he also illustrates his intention to maintain his group as a comfortable one, which is seen at the end of the excerpt above. This is the first instance where he presented his concern about the relationship between not only his instruction and the student resultant action but also his action and the group atmosphere.

Two weeks after, he could not concentrate in the class as he felt somehow exhausted. He did not participate in the class as he usually expected the students to do. Then, he had to ask himself—*"How would the students emulate me if I would not show the effort to be actively involved in the activities?" (4 April)*. This suggests that he still holds the image of facilitator as an ideal model for the students to follow. However, at the same time, undergoing such a less active and less responsible participation asked him to reflect on that the facilitators including him criticized less active students in the course without considering what was actually happening to each student. That is, he began to consider that each student may have some reasons to be less active in the class. This led him to further question himself about what it means to be a facilitator as well as a teacher. He wondered whether failing to be an ideal model should be an obstacle of instructing students. Eventually, he wrote a question—*"What does teaching mean in the first place?"* (4 April) which he has not answered as far as the author knows. Reflecting upon his facilitation in the classes resulted in addressing his very fundamental presupposition about teaching and learning in language classes.

In the following weeks, he started to show a different approach to his group and the students in the group compared to the one perhaps labelled as an instructor. First, he recognized the connection between the positive atmosphere in his group and an active and confident engagement of a student who used to remain quiet. Regarding this, he stated—"*I felt a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment"* (8 April). Further, he attributed a student *"nervousness"* instead of her *"insufficient language proficiency"* to her silence in the group (15 April). Without direct observation, this study is not able to affirm whether he changed his way of participation in his group. However, at least from Andrea's point of view, it is evident that the atmosphere of the group turned to be positive and then the atmosphere encouraged the students who had remained hesitant to actively participate.

At the end of the semester and thereafter, Andrea repositioned himself as a facilitator. He began to see himself as not the one who *"looks down the students from the above"* but the one who walks with the students as he puts it—*"all of us are walking this path together step by step"* (17 May). Initially, he envisioned a facilitator as an ideal model for the students to emulate. That is why the ideal facilitator can *"instruct"* the student and the students can *"emulate"* the facilitator. At this point, however, he saw making mistakes as an ordinary habit for the teacher, facilitator and the students. If so, he thought that all of them including himself could remain calm to communicate with each other to redo what initially went wrong altogether. This type of communication might be understood as what they wanted to call dialogue in the course.

Concluding Discussion

Drawing on SL and CoP, this study has explored the facilitator group and one of the facilitators—Andrea in the dialogic Japanese language course at an Italian university.

This study first focused on the change which the facilitator group underwent to demonstrate how the contexts of learning for each facilitator was formed, negotiated, changed, and sustained. Regarding the domain of the group, it was identified that their focus shifted from listening to and following the teacher instructions to thinking of and discussing how their action can support the student dialogic learning. The community of the group became more and more dynamic as more varieties of facilitators expressed their opinions to each other rather than directing their questions and opinions only to the teacher. The quality of their interactions—practice—changed from hesitant and confirmatory ones to active, autonomous and critical one. Previous studies found that classrooms in reality may not become resemblances of the original CoP due to some misalignments between classroom reality and the CoP (Haneda, 2006, Kojima & Thomson, 2019). However, in this study, the facilitator group which was embedded in the course structure but had less institutional regulations may have exploited its potential and become what this study may call "a facilitator CoP". Drawing on the findings, this study suggests designing a learning environment by interconnecting different communities e.g. the ones focusing on actual practice and the ones focusing on reflection in the case of this study. Participating in different but interconnected communities successively may enhance participatory learning experience e.g. critical reflection of one's own thinking and actions compared to the stand-alone learning experience in each separated community.

This study then shifted its focus to the focal facilitator—Andrea—to understand the participatory learning experience of peer-facilitator who are involved in FL education. His change over the semester was notable. Initially, he established the image of the facilitator as the one who would *"instruct"* the students. The facilitator was an authoritative figure despite its name aims to promote less authority (O'Dwyer, 2006). It appears normal that students attach such an authoritative image—which may often originate from the typical image of teachers—to facilitators when they are assigned to be the facilitators. Especially when the discussion about a clear distinction between teachers and facilitators is absent in classes, such a case can be more likely to occur. However, Andrea had to question himself repeatedly about the authoritative image while he as a facilitator underwent a range of emotion from frustration, confusion and satisfaction over the semester. No matter what kind of emotion he underwent, what is important to remark here is that the shift of his facilitator image—from the facilitator as an instructor or controller of the student learning to a supporter of the student learning—seemed to resonate with the change that the facilitator group underwent. Thus, this study drawing on CoP and SL (Wenger et al., 2002, Lave & Wenger, 1991) underlines the significance of social context for the participatory learning experience of individuals. It is commonly understood that teaching through words—instruction, explanation and clarification—have an educational power. This study indicates that teaching through facilitating participatory learning experience can equally have its unique educational power.

This study suggests that outcomes explored from a participatory learning perspective may not be easily and immediately observable unlike outcomes explored from an acquisitional learning perspective. Until the end, Andrea did not overtly state any answer to his fundamental question—*"what does teaching mean in the first place?"*. Indeed, Andrea appeared to start demonstrating the unverbalized thoughts through his actions in his group already in the midway of the semester. For instance, it was evident that he paid more attention to the student emotion and group atmosphere than

student competences in Japanese. Nevertheless, he did not reach a conclusive answer to his question even after the semester ended. Andrea may still think about his answer to the question. Drawing on Andrea's experience, this study asks teachers, students and even the general public to stop expecting that outcomes should immediately become observable. Today, it is often supposed that teachers should reveal and students should demonstrate learning outcomes within a short period especially in the ten-week to fifteen-week term/semester system which seems to be common for many institutions. The outcomes of learning designed based on the acquisitional learning perspective may be suited to meet such a demand since testing whether students have memorized pieces of knowledge is often integrated. However, it may not be ideal to apply such an assumption when exploring the outcomes of learning as participation (e.g. Morita, 2004) as doing so might result in preventing teachers and students from addressing complex and challenging but crucial and meaningful questions that require a long time to answer. Further, not only may the outcomes but also the process of participatory learning need to be carefully considered as the value of participatory learning appears to be embedded in the wide range of emotion and experience which individuals, like Andrea, have to face. To conclude, this study suggests changing an attitude towards learning outcomes because now, students, as Andrea did, often have to encounter and address questions that have no definitive answer.

This study focused on one facilitator group and one facilitator in the group. While this study offers insight regarding peer-facilitator learning experiences in relation to FL education, one case study is insufficient to apply the insight coming from their experiences to wider contexts. Therefore, more and more future studies about peer-facilitators are called for to actualize quality FL education across contexts.

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