Looking Back 報告

Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning: Joe Falout and Alison Stewart discuss the symposium at AILA 2014

去る8月にオーストラリアのブリスベンで行われたAILA学会で、Joe FaloutとAlison StewartがTerry LambとGarold Murray両氏の司会によるシンポジウム（The Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning）に参加しました。そしてそのシンポジウムでは、日本の大学の語学学習センターからロシアのEmirati大学の片隅や浴場など、様々なコンテクストでの語学学習者の経験に関する６つの発表が行われました。シンポジウムでは、空間と場所に関し、例えば空間と場所がどのように学習者に影響を与え学習者が解釈するか、またどのように空間を概念化し、政策とデザインに関する判断をする際に生かしていけるのか、さらに学習者オートノミーの理解にどのようなヒントを与えるかなど、様々な議論について光を当てていました。

At the AILA conference that took place in Brisbane, Australia this August, Joe Falout and Alison Stewart attended the Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning symposium convened by Terry Lamb and Garold Murray. The symposium consisted of six presentations by researchers on the experiences of language learners in contexts ranging from Japanese university language study centres to hidden corners in an Emirati university building to a Russian bathhouse. The aim of the symposium was to shed light on a series of questions on space and place: how it affects learners and the uses they make of it, how we can conceptualize space and how we can use our understanding of it to make decisions regarding policy and design, what light this might shed on our understandings of (learner) autonomy.

Alison: Joe, I remember that we were both bowled away by this symposium, and decided there and then to continue and deepen our conversation about it in a written dialogue that we could share with members of the Learner Development SIG. To recapture the excitement and inspiration

of the event, shall we start by reviewing the presentations and recounting what it was that attracted us to them?

Joe: Sure, I'll start with the first presentation of the symposium: Cynthia White's "Emotion in the construction of space, place and autonomous learning opportunities." She drew on some fascinating case studies, including one of learners of Russian in a study abroad program in St. Petersburg, and another of learners in New Zealand and Germany interacting together in a telecollaboration project. Cynthia investigated how specific settings can contribute to invoking emotions in learners, and how the memories of those experiences add to the construction of identity. During encounters with others in which the L2 was used, these students reportedly experienced a range of powerful emotions. Such emotions help shape important aspects of people's learning and identity formation, and thus merit more attention in language learning research.

Although the focus of this symposium was on space, the themes of time and motion struck me as something integral to all the presentations. These aspects were particularly highlighted in Cynthia's presentation. For example, one learner of Russian in St. Petersburg was asked by a Russian woman for directions in the subway. While walking together, the learner tried to start up a conversation. But the woman responded strangely, and they ended up walking silently in the same direction, but now separated some distance from each other. Trying to understand what had gone wrong, the learner said she wanted to stop time, like pausing a scene in a movie, and try to get inside the other person's mind to figure out what went wrong with the conversation. She was wondering if she had made some cultural *faux pas*, or pragmatic error, or if it was her accent that caused some misunderstanding. These kinds of emotions and confusion may be happening in language classrooms, influencing how learners see themselves as users of the L2 for better or worse, and I wonder how teachers might recognize such moments and address them.

Alison: Cynthia's presentation resonated strongly with me too. At a personal level, her examples brought back my own memories of learning languages. The memories of occasions and the emotions I felt at the time are still clear, almost visceral: for example, the confusion and frustration I felt at my failure to explain to my Russian roommate that her boyfriend had called round and then gone again, but subsequent delight when I realized that I finally understood how verbs of motion work in that language. As a teacher of English and student of Japanese, I need to be aware that the emotional impact of language in authentic contexts of use is more powerful than in attempts to describe those contexts.

Whilst Cynthia's study highlighted the interconnectedness of context and emotion and their role in learning and identity formation, the other side of the coin is that learners can imbue the meaning of spaces around them with their own identities, in other words, they can appropriate space for their own purposes and needs, not necessarily in the ways imagined by the designers of those spaces or by their teachers. Gergana Alzeer's "Spatio-learning experiences of Emirati female students in a single gender context" featured a series of stunning photographs of

black-clad young women appropriating spaces in a hyper-modern university building, sitting on floors, under the stairs, and in a tiny empty alcove intended for a water fountain. Alzeer's ethnographic study of the learners and the places they inhabit culminates in a complex map, representing the ways in which these modern desert women engaged with the "hot" and "cold" places in their environment.

Joe: A surprising thing about their sitting in odd places was that plenty of chairs and desks stood empty nearby. Yet they choose the floor for what appeared to be serious individual studying. I wondered whether the original space makers, the architects, would be angrily astonished or gleefully delighted that the facilities were being appropriated and used for purposes not initially intended. My guess is that most architects, as artists of public space, would embrace the new uses that people make of such spaces, and allow this ambiguity and potential for multifarious uses to inform their future design.

Alison: What struck me most about these images was the clash or mismatch of identities in these surroundings. It was startling to see the way these women chose to ignore the chairs and sit on the floor, but it was also startling to see them carrying fashionable handbags while wearing the conservative burka. In a way, you could say these women are rebels—subverting expected identities that are created or assumed in the context. In the classroom, it's assumed that they would sit on chairs; wearing burka, it's assumed that they wouldn't be interested in western designer accessories.

Joe: Yes, Alison, this is important because it shows that learners relate to the spaces they enter by conforming to or by resisting identities that are assumed of them in that space. Another presentation concerned with how public spaces are used was "Social learning spaces and 'the Invisible Fence'" by Garold Murray, Naomi Fujishima, and Mariko Uzuka. They used the concept of "communities of practice" to investigate membership of and access to spaces in a Social Language Learning Space (SLLS) at a large Japanese university. In particular, one concern of the SLLS was about making newcomers feel invited and included, which can be difficult as spaces of participation can be created via the exclusion of others. Various ways were used to help newcomer students gain access, such as old-timers inviting passers-by inside the SLLS, decorating the entryways with posters bearing information about the activities inside, and providing newcomers with roles for participation.

      This makes me realize that spaces can exist even where there are no actual walls or lines of demarcation. The example in this presentation was an open door to the SLLS: the spaces inside and outside the SLLS are open to each other, and merge to form a single space. Similarly, inside the SLLS, subspaces may not actually have walls that keep people out, but when others are using the area, some students may feel they are not allowed in. It's another case of the mutually constitutive influence of spaces on the behaviours and identities of the people who inhabit them. This reminds me of another study in which office location became a determining factor for

students taking doctoral exams. Those with offices more central in relation to the other offices on campus were physically able to consult more with each other and, through sharing their beliefs about ways of coping with the stress and studying for the exams, eventually fared better than those with offices on the periphery (Mechanic, 1978).

Alison: Interesting! So it's not only a matter of spaces having insides and outsides, but also of centres and peripheries! It's very complicated, isn't it? I think one of the most interesting aspects of all in this presentation, as with all the presentations in this symposium, is the way it brought out new dimensions of what constitutes context. Physical space is one dimension, but atmosphere is also part of context. Or is it? Is atmosphere created or at least influenced by the physical properties of a place, or is it something that arises from the interactions and relationships between the people inhabiting it? These are some of the key questions that occurred to me from listening to Garold, Naomi and Mariko's presentation, and also from another presentation of research set in Japan by Katherine Thornton.

Joe: That's right, Alison. Katherine's presentation dealt with space and place in a self-access centre in Japan. Combining questionnaires with student and staff observations over three semesters, she explored how students thought, felt, and behaved in various areas and rooms (i.e., subspaces) within a newly built self-access centre. The purpose of the study was to use the findings to promote meaningful uses of the various subspaces in the center. One of the changes made was the name of the overall space, the centre, from something sounding like a large organization to a friendly community café, E-CO (meaning English Café at Otemon). The main finding was that students were inclined to use spaces that were most convenient for socialising, such as sitting in a cozy corner with small sofas or standing around the counter chatting. Students spent less time in quiet study but they increased their social use of English over Japanese, and the Japanese that they did use became more oriented toward learning socially rather than just socializing (i.e., they were talking about learning). Spaces created collaboratively for learning within a relaxed social environment increased students' willingness to communicate in English. Notably, the students' own preferences for using space were included in the decision-making for improving the design of the facility.

Alison: While the previous two studies looked at how students do or don't appropriate institutional space for their own learning purposes, the last two presentations dealt with the learning that students do outside of the classroom. In Lindsay Miller and Christoph Hafner's presentation, "Creating spaces for autonomous learning in an EST course", the locus of learning was shifted to outside the institution, a Hong Kong university, as more traditional writing assignments were replaced with corpus quizzes, a group project to make a scientific video documentary, and an individual written report. A study of the students, using questionnaires and focus groups, as well as project artifacts and out-of-class communication, pinpointed where and how the students interacted about their video project. Whereas class time was devoted to

preparation and support in creating and filming the documentary, the students took ownership of the project and spent a remarkable number of hours practicing and honing the quality of their final video.

Joe: Lindsay and Christoph's presentation also reminds me that out-of-class learning is where most learning actually occurs, as language learning requires a lot of time, more than what can usually be offered within the time constraints of a class and curriculum. Therefore, it's important for their own developing autonomy as life-long learners that students recognize this and make time for learning English outside of the classroom and the class schedule.

Alison: I agree, Joe, and I would say that the huge increase in time spent on the project was undoubtedly the key here. A similar point comes through in the final presentation "Public pedagogy through mobile learning: Autonomy and acquisition" by Hayo Reinders. Hayo reported on a refreshingly traditional experiment to test the effect of listening to audio books using mobile phones on Korean students' acquisition of the passive voice. The study divided a cohort of students into three groups: over the course of one week, one group listened to audio books with pauses inserted, a second listening to audio books with the speed slowed down, and a control group listened to the audio books played at normal speed. Predictably, the first group performed slightly better than the second, which performed slightly better than the third, and all three group performed better in the post-test grammar check than in the pre-test check. Statistically, however, the results were not significant. Nevertheless, the students enjoyed the activity, and it is this enjoyment that will make it more likely that they will continue the activity and get to spend the additional hours listening which should eventually enhance their learning. These final two presentations weren't so much about space and place in the way that the first four were; instead they focused on the learners, the spaces that they move in and out of, and the opportunities that they have or make for autonomous learning.

Joe: What I learned from these two last presentations was how much attention and interest can be enhanced when learners have the freedom to choose the time and place for their learning. I wonder if the Hong Kong students working on the video project were even aware of how much time they spent doing it. That state of becoming enraptured in the process itself, of losing oneself to the activity, is a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi,1990).

Alison: This is really interesting! When you are completely absorbed in something, time and place seem to fall away—only the activity itself remains. Flow is complete freedom of action and thought; space, or the awareness of it, is actually a constraint on freedom. What do you think?

Joe: Yes, that's right Alison! In this sense, space can be binding. I suppose that in other senses space can bring liberation. For the group project from Hong Kong, some students enjoyed working individually from within their own rooms, a private space, while collaborating together online, a

public space. Alternatively, by sitting in the alcove of a public hallway, as seen in the Emirati university, a student positions herself in a restricted space to attain privacy. So what we see here is that people's uses of space are important for how they see themselves, and how they wish to interact with or avoid others.

Alison: I would agree with you: space can bring liberation, but how does that work? I think what I want to say is that space usually is a constraint. As Lefebvre (2009) writes, "Space is political and ideological" (p. 171). What I take this to mean is that space, whether in the physical sense of a building, a street, a park, or a forest, or in the symbolic sense of social space (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990), is created and appropriated by people with particular purposes in mind. The opposite of space would be the void or entropy, that is, space with no meaning and no purpose. So space is necessary, because it gives things meaning. It also provides us with affordances (van Lier, 2001; Menezes, 2011), that is, opportunities for learning, provided we have the autonomy to seize those opportunities. In its original sense, an affordance is something in our environment that pushes us to change or adjust our behaviour (Gibson, 1992). I think this is the sense in which we can think of space and place in learner autonomy. When we are habituated to something, we forget about space and place, but when we're new to something, such as a new language, space and place maybe matter more.

Joe: That's a good observation. We don't usually notice much about the spaces and places with which we are most familiar. This was also the subject of a plenary at the AILA conference by Elena Shohamy. Public spaces and their influence on human interaction can be constructed by the linguistic landscape, particularly the texts, symbols, and pictures seen in outdoor or open locations, such as on signs, mass-produced and replicated by industrial processes, such as the design of commodities, and in print, video, and internet media. Linguistic landscapes represent and help create individual and cultural identities, power relationships, and transgressions (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

One of the exciting things suggested to me from this symposium was the notion that learners can actively participate in the creation of their private and public spaces for learning. At any moment, students have choices and can create opportunities to collaborate with others, distribute their knowledge, and situate themselves within physical, psychological, social, and temporal spaces. Natural fluctuations and fluidity, and contextual co-constructing dynamics, can shape these spaces. For me, this means that teachers and students can choose to act autonomously, that human autonomy articulates and becomes articulated by language use within and beyond spaces and places, some of which we are very familiar with, and some we are not even aware of.

Alison, what new understandings came to you from this symposium?

Alison: I'm not sure it's a new understanding so much as a clarification that space is a vital and dynamic way of looking at power relations in social contexts. The "social turn" (Block, 2003) has

been recognized as a major advance in applied linguistics for more than a decade. I would like to hope that a "spatial turn" (a term which, I realize, has been in force for well over two decades in other fields) will be our next new horizon. As I mentioned before, there are already pioneers in our field, such as the late Leo van Lier and Vera Menezes, who have broken new ground in their explorations of affordances. Gergana's use of Lefebvre in her study was really fascinating as an example of how postmodern spatial theories can underpin research into learner autonomy. But the symposium as a whole, convened by Garold Murray and Terry Lamb, must be commended as a showcase of cutting-edge research.

   As a final word, I note that the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine has this year gone to John O'Keefe, Edvard Moser and May-Britt Moser for their research into "place cells". These brain cells not only help us map our way around the world, "but in humans at least they form part of the spatiotemporal scaffold in our brains that supports our autobiographical memory" (BBC, October 6th, 2014). What clearer indication can there be than this, of the importance of space and place in human lives? What greater precedence can there be of the need to research it in our own field of applied linguistics?

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If you are interested in doing -- and, with mentoring, feel competent to do -- a PhD in the area of 'History of the language learner autonomy movement' please get into contact with him at <R.C.Smith@warwick.ac.uk>.

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