

## Exploring Effects of Socially Mediated Interactions on Learners' L2 Motivation

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### Abstract

The field of advising in foreign language learning has been attracting more attention in language education. In self-access centres, learning advisors support learners to gain self-directed learning skills and develop awareness about their learning. From a theoretical point of view, sociocultural theory and constructivism emphasise the importance of socially mediated interactions and can be applied to the field of advising in language learning (Mynard & Kato, 2016). Socially mediated interactions are an important factor for language learners to reflect on their learning progress and develop both language and learning skills. Ushioda (2003) states that interactive support from experts helps learners' motivation and promotes learner autonomy. This research investigates how socially mediated interactions with a learning advisor support learners to be autonomous throughout a self-directed learning module in the SAC at a university in Japan. In the process, they are guided by a learning advisor in both spoken and written interactions enabling them to discover more about themselves as learners. The analysis of interviews demonstrates how students became aware of their language and learning progress, as well as affective aspects of the self-directed learning process, through socially mediated interactions with a learning advisor.

### 要旨

外国語学習アドバイジングの分野は、言語教育においてより多くの注目を浴びるようになってきている。自律学習センターでは、学習者が自己管理的学習 (self-directed learning) を習得し、自らの学習に対する気づきを促進するようラーニングアドバイザーがサポートを行っている。理論的観点において、社会文化理論と社会構成主義はともに社会的相互作用の重要性を強調しており、言語学習アドバイジングの分野においても適用できると言われている(Mynard & Kato, 2016)。相互作用は言語学習者が自らの学習成果を振り返り、言語と学習のスキルを向上するための重要な役割を担っている。さらに Ushioda (2003) は、学習者の目標に精通した熟練者による相互的サポートは学習者の動機を助長し、自律学習を促すと述べている。本稿では、日本の大学における自律学習センターで提供されている自己管理的学習モジュールを通して、ラーニングアドバイザーとの社会的相互作用がどのように学生たちの自発性を促進しているのかを考察する。モジュールでは、ラーニングアドバイザーの口頭と記述両方からのサポートを通して、学生たち自らが、自身がどのような学習者なのかを知る機会を多く設けている。また、インタビューの結果をもとに、ラーニングアドバイザーとの社会的相互作用を通して、学生たちが言語と学習スキルの成長、そして自己管理的学習の過程に起こる情意に関してどのように振り返ったのかも論証する。

Keywords: self-directed learning, self-access, learner autonomy, socially mediated interactions, motivation 自己管理的学習、自律学習、学習者オートノミー、社会的相互作用、モチベーション

This study aims to explore learner motivation in socially mediated interactions. Curry, Mynard, Noguchi and Watkins (2017) stated that autonomous language learners are learners who possess “a good understanding of self-directed language learning (SDLL); that is cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social processes that govern learning” (p. 17). Socially mediated interactions play a crucial role in learner autonomy, and numerous researchers have researched the ability of socially mediated interactions to help language learners be more engaged in their learning (Mynard & Kato, 2016; Yamashita, 2015). This short research article aims to understand more about learners’ motivation through socially mediated interactions with a learning advisor while taking an optional module offered at a Japanese university.

### **The setting**

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is a private university specialising in the fields of foreign languages and intercultural communication. For all students, learning English is compulsory, and the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) provides various types of resources (such as self-learning sheets and courses) and access to specialists (such as learning advisors) to support students to learn and practice English outside their classes. When I conducted this research in the 2016/2017 academic year, the language policy in the SALC was English only.

The SALC’s mission in KUIS is to “foster learner autonomy by providing learners with opportunities to reflect and take charge of individualizing their language learning, and to develop skills for the learning experience and making informed choices” (SALC, n.d.). That is, the SALC is a learning space where students can explore their language learning journeys based on their own targets and goals with support from learning advisors, friends, lecturers and others.

### **Learning advisors**

The aim of a learning advisor in KUIS is to support learners to gain self-directed learning skills and an awareness of their learning through both spoken and written dialogue. Learning advisors offer various forms of support, including 30-minute face-to-face advisory sessions, help desk support (learners can drop in with questions), and other informal advising that takes place in the SALC. In addition, the SALC offers self-directed learning courses to support students to be more responsible for their learning outside of class. Through both spoken and written advisory sessions, a learning advisor facilitates a learner’s reflective processes in language learning in order for the learner to become more capable of planning their self-directed learning (Kato & Mynard, 2016).

### **How the module supports learner autonomy**

The SALC module is a self-directed module that learners complete with the support of learning advisors. At the time of the study (April 2016 to January 2017), the module was non-credit bearing. Through the module, learning advisors encourage learners to think about their learning processes actively to become more independent learners. Although the interactions between learners and advisors are largely conducted through written correspondence, learners can book one-to-one advisory sessions whenever required. The content of the module is as follows:

Week 1: Goal setting

Week 2: Learning strategies

Week 3: Resources

Week 4: The SURE (study, use, review and evaluate) learning cycle and creating a learning plan

Weeks 5 - 8: Self-directed learning journal

In the first four weeks, the module introduces “the concept of self-directed learning by explicitly teaching the learners about useful tools for taking charge of their language learning” (Mynard, Curry, Noguchi & Watkins, 2016, p. 47). Later, they make learning plans based on their own goals, strategies, and chosen resources and utilise self-directed learning journals for a month.

### **Motivation as an interactive process**

Ushioda (2003, p. 90) drew on McCombs (1994) to say that “learners’ capacity for autonomy, their motivation must be viewed as an intrinsic part of human nature, yet one which needs supportive interpersonal interactions and an optimal learning environment in order to grow in positive ways.” In addition, Ushioda (2003, 2007) stated that the interactive support and scaffolding provided by experts have an impact on increasing learners’ motivation. That is, as learning is a social and intrapersonal process, socially mediated interactions are one of the key factors that support learners’ motivation and provide scope for learner autonomy. For example, Yamashita (2015) focused on socially mediated dialogic interactions between a learner and a learning advisor and conducted a case study that considered the learner’s affect as a resource. She analysed spoken advisory sessions in Japanese with a Japanese learner of English and saw how the learner came to control (or understand) her affect over the period. Yamashita (2015, p. 79) summarized that “As the learner accumulated more dialogic interactions, the learner progressively became the central agent in utilizing her affective states, developing her motivational and metacognitive awareness.” Her research indicated that the socially mediated interactions and support provided by an expert had a positive impact on the learner’s motivation and helped in controlling her affect, leading her to develop her learner autonomy. Her research, however, specifically focused on the learner’s affective capacity as a resource through spoken interactions between a learner and a learning advisor; in contrast, in the present study, I am interested in the broader reasons why socially mediated interactions by an expert support learners’ motivation and I seek to investigate the following research question:

How do socially mediated interactions with a learning advisor help learners on the module to get motivated and sustain their language learning?

### **Method**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with four students who completed the module with the author as their learning advisor in the 2016/2017 academic year. All of them had booked advisory sessions with their learning advisor regularly depending on their purposes, in addition to written dialogue throughout the module.

The interview questions below were designed to address the questions:

- What made you continue your module every week?
- How did you feel about the relationship between you and your learning advisor?

Interviews were conducted face to face in Japanese and audio-recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. When the data were analysed, I found three elements of interaction between a learner and a learning advisor: affective scaffolding, promotion of learner's reflective process, and exploration of learning strategies.

### Participants

Student A, a second-year student studying international business communication in the International Communication Department, had tried the module twice in his first year but could not complete it. When he took the module with me, it was his third time attempting to learn about self-directed study.

Student B, a second-year student in the English Department, took the module to get more opportunities to use the SALC and to improve her listening skills for TOEFL ITP, on which she needed a certain score for a class on the Teacher Licence Course.

Student C, a first-year student in the English Department, took the module to develop her speaking skills. She requested a Japanese advisor to advise her for the module.

Student D, a second-year student in the English Department, wanted to improve her speaking skills through taking the module.

### Findings

Through the interviews with the four module takers and subsequent analysis, I found that socially mediated interactions between a learner and a learning advisor seemed to offer the following:

- a means of affective scaffolding
- opportunities for a learner to reflect on their learning process
- an exploration of effective learning strategies.

#### A means of affective scaffolding

All participants pointed out that affective scaffolding was the most important form of interactive support that they gained from their learning advisor through taking the module. Having an environment where the learner feels comfortable with sharing their affective and emotional states with someone (i.e., a learning advisor) is crucial to being more autonomous.

*Student C – In class, not only me but also other classmates have equal opportunities to speak. On the other hand, in a one-to-one dialogue with my learning advisor, as this is “my time,” I do not need to be rushed, and I can focus on my speaking. Additionally, my learning advisor often summarises and restates what I said, and that makes me feel she understands me. I feel less anxious*

*about my speaking skills and silence when I talk with her. (translated from Japanese by the author)*

Student C noticed that having opportunities to voice her feelings and to feel relieved speaking her target language had a positive impact on her learning experience outside class.

*Student A – I realised that interacting with my learning advisor keeps my motivation high. This may be because I like to talk with people like a teacher and a learning advisor to develop myself depending on my interests.*

Through taking the module, Student A noticed that his preferred learning style, which was to get support from teachers and learning advisors, helped him to develop his skills more than learning by himself. This relationship is exactly what Ushioda (2003) stated: Interactive support from experts plays a critical role in increasing a learner's motivation.

*Student B – Showing my learning advisor my weekly learning journals pushed me to study in a good way, and written feedback made me confident in my learning. In the one-to-one spoken advisory sessions, I was not anxious about my linguistic mistakes because my focus was on increasing opportunities using the SALC.*

*Student D – I looked forward to written feedback from my learning advisor (and fancy stickers!). Though I thought that the SALC was a difficult place to go to, I have come to know more people in the SALC, and that led me to go there more often after taking the module. The module gave me a connection with not only my learning advisor but also the SALC.*

As both Students B and D mentioned, one of the roles of a learning advisor is to give learners positive experiences in the SALC and to provide a connection with the SALC. Why learners feel uncomfortable going to the SALC needs to be considered in future research; it is clear that some learners desire to use the SALC effectively and try to fulfil this need by making a connection with a learning advisor.

### **Opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning process**

As the module and the learning advisor aim to encourage a language learner to gain self-directed skills, the interview data clearly show that learners gain more opportunities to reflect on their learning process through the module.

*Student A – I noticed that my goal was vague when I was a first-year student. Because of that, I was not able to use appropriate strategies to develop my language skills and ended up giving up the module. Now, I am able to make a clear learning plan and study routine for improving my English and learning skills.*

Student A reflected on the reason why he could not complete the module in his first year at KUIS—because he did not have enough time to consider what he wanted to focus on in his language learning. While focusing on his academic writing skills, he tried academic writing practice and showed his work to the Writing Centre, where students can get writing support (through English lecturers checking structures, vocabulary usage, and grammar) once a week. In addition, he established spoken reflection session with his learning advisor and that became his weekly routine. Based on his interview, continuing

his learning plan for a certain period of time gave him a sense of achievement in his language learning and motivated him to continue to study.

*Student B – The written dialogue helped me to discover different strategies to develop my English skills, and I could spend more time on considering my learning process and looking back at what I did based on the feedback. I recognised that having a clear goal keeps my motivation high.*

As Student B mentioned above, one of the positive aspects of written comments is that both the learner and the learning advisor can look back on the learning process whenever needed. While looking back on her learning journal for the module, Student B noticed what was important for achieving her own goal. Written reflection and interactions encourages learners to think deeply about their learning process and develop metacognitive skills (Mynard & Navarro, 2010; Mynard & Thornton, 2012).

*Student C – I learned both negative and positive aspects of my learning through spoken dialogue, and that helped me to review my learning process and make my weekly target for the next week. Before taking the module, I did not think about my learning deeply. Even in class, I sometimes zoned out, but I started to try using English more consciously.*

As Student C pointed out, she gradually became more able to think about her learning process. In both spoken and written interactions with her, I noticed that the learner was able to answer powerful questions that were aimed at developing her metacognitive skills.

### **An exploration of effective learning strategies**

In my own experience, learners who have less learning experience tend to use the same materials and learning strategies that they have used before, such as the grammar textbooks that they used in high school. Thus, socially mediated interactions with a learning advisor or other experts like teachers often give them new insights for their language learning journey.

*Student B – For my TOEFL ITP study, I only used the official study book and never tried other resources. My advisor suggested to me that I try TEDed<sup>1</sup>, and I learned that there are many materials for language learning. Though I am still exploring appropriate resources for my target, I discovered different learning strategies using new materials through the module.*

*Student D – While I was trying out the self-directed learning journal, a teacher at the Practice Centre (where a student can practise speaking English with an English lecturer for 15 minutes) advised me to check what I could not say after having a conversation, and the strategy was very useful for my goal.*

The interview data show that the socially mediated interactions offered in the SALC help learners to explore various learning materials and strategies to achieve their own goals. In the interview, both Student B and C reflected on the importance of building a relationship between them and experts such as learning advisors and lecturers. A good relationship in socially mediated interactions encourages them to try new strategies and resources for their language learning.

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<sup>1</sup> TEDed is an online collaborative learning platform for teachers and learners. See <https://ed.ted.com/>

## Conclusion

Autonomy must come from within; yet, socially mediated interactions support the development of autonomy (Ushioda, 2003). That is, SDLL is highly interpersonal. As Ushioda (2007) stated, the interactive support and scaffolding provided by experts have an impact on increasing learners' motivation; both spoken and written interactions are crucial factors that motivate learners to keep learning English. Through the interviews with the students, I noticed that the learners had increased engagement in their learning through the module, and both written and spoken dialogue gave them deeper understandings of their learning process, particularly in reviewing their learning process and making plans for the future. Although most of the participants had had little previous opportunity to think about their learning deeply, while or after taking the module, they clearly became more conscious of their learning processes. This suggests that socially mediated interactions are essential to the development of learner autonomy.

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