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Developing Young EFL Students' Ability to Develop Topics Through Reflection and Recursive Practice

INTRODUCTION

As a language learner myself, I was always fascinated by the power of reflection. According to Mynard et al. (2023), reflection is "an essential part of the language learning process" (p. 3). As I positioned myself as both English teacher and language researcher to teach English while conducting a study on three Japanese elementary school students at a private English language school in Nagoya, in an Action Research (AR) framework, I was able to witness how reflection guided my students to develop their self-awareness towards their performance by integrating recursive practice into communicative activities. Recursive practice is "applying self-reference like a spiral staircase to bring [the learners] to higher and higher levels" (O'Conner & McDermott, 1997, p. 100, as cited in Kindt, 2002, p. 13). In other words, instead of repeating the same practices mechanically, learners were encouraged to focus on continuous self-improvement by integrating reflection. This approach provided a framework for my students to engage in reflection, not as a one-time activity, but as a continuous cycle of improvement. In addition, having a dual role, as teacher and researcher, allowed me to focus on how reflective and recursive practice could enhance students' self-awareness of their performance as they expanded conversations by asking questions spontaneously.

RESEARCH ISSUE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The main issue that the students in this class faced in promoting skills to develop conversational topics in English was the limited amount of class time, as lessons were held only once a week for 50 minutes. After observing the class for one month, it became clear that students tended to forget what they had learned in the previous lesson. Even though they were able to remember and perform scripted conversations from memory, often because they had practiced and memorized these dialogues at home, they continued to struggle with asking spontaneous follow-up questions, a skill that requires repeated exposure to communicative activities. This suggested that students needed additional support to build skills for unscripted communication, not just memorized performance.

To address the challenge, I implemented reflective practices to encourage students to look at their performance objectively and increase their self-awareness. Based on this, I conducted a study to answer the following research question:

(1) What effect, if any, do reflective practices have on learners' use of unscripted follow-up questions to expand the conversation?

METHODS

This section is divided into two subsections: (1) teaching context, and (2) data collection and analysis. All names mentioned are pseudonyms except for the researcher's name. Moreover, all written reports were completed by students in Japanese and translated into English by the researcher, with the translation indicated in italics. Both the school and the students gave their informed consent to participate in the research.

TEACHING CONTEXT

This research study was conducted at a private English-language school in Nagoya, where students meet once a week for 50 minutes with one to six students in each class. For this study, I was assigned to a class of three elementary school students: two females, Kaho (Grade 6) and Rina (Grade 5), and one male, Hiro (Grade 6).

Students participated in multiple communicative and reflective activities, such as: (1) performance tests (conducted in October and December 2024), (2) recursive practice, and (3) reflection logs. For the performance test, students participated in non-scripted conversation for about three minutes in pairs about a topic I assigned, which was repeated multiple times. The last pair of conversations was recorded and later transcribed. This performance test activity followed a recursive practice format: (1) preparation, (2) interaction, and (3) one-minute reflection. During the third step, I asked the students the same question each time, "What do you want to do to improve your conversation?" This approach encouraged students to think critically and improve their skills gradually rather than simply repeating tasks. After each performance test, students reflected on their performance through a reflection log.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Multiple data sources were used in order to show that the findings are accurate and trustworthy: (1) video recordings, (2) transcription, (3) reflection logs, and (4) reflection from recursive practice. Video recording captured real-time interaction and offered an objective perspective on classroom activities. Transcriptions enabled detailed linguistic analysis of student conversation and language use (Jefferson, 2004). Reflection logs provided insights into students' perceptions of their own performance and progress. Recursive practice reflections documented ongoing learning experiences, which captured students' evolving thoughts and engagement with classroom tasks.

ANALYSIS

Research Question: What effect, if any, do reflective practices have on learners' use of unscripted follow-up questions to expand the conversation?

Students participated in two performance tests, one in October (about their favorite activity) and another in December (about their ideal dish). In the October performance test, the use of unscripted follow-up questions was well embedded into the content of the interaction (see Excerpt 1). In this excerpt, Rina and Kaho are sharing their favorite activity and their role models. Before Excerpt 1, they both established what Rina's favorite activity and her role model were. From Line 19, Rina is asking questions about Kaho's favorite activity and her role model.

Excerpt 1: Rina's use of unscripted follow-up questions (October)

```
19  Rina   (ha) (any)way what is your favorite activity? [00:01:38.14]
20  Kaho   (  ) I like play basketball? [00:01:41.05]
21  Rina   basketball: nice. (.) why. [00:01:45.14]
22  Kaho   eh: it is FUn. [00:01:47.19]
23  Rina   I see. (2.2) えっと {etto-, well} (.) who is your role model?=
24  Kaho   =my role model is Yuki Kawamura (Japanese basketball player)?
25  Rina   Yu:ki Kawamura: I see: [00:02:00.15]
(1.8)
26  Rina   <why> [00:02:03.08]
27  Kaho   °why:?° ha ha
28  Rina   ha=
29  Kaho   =>ah- えっと {etto., well} whyってなんだっけ {tte nandakke<, what did
           why mean} ah- (.) AH えっと {ETto::, well} it- HE: run: fast. he shoot
           ball a lot. [00:02:12.27]
(1.0)
30  Rina   I see. [00:02:15.14]
31  Kaho   (                  )
32  Rina   えっと {etto:, well} (.) tell me more [00:02:19.26]
33  Kaho   AH::? ha えっと {e:tto-, well} .hh eh: eh:: えっと {<e:tto::>, well}
           (.) ka: Yuki Kawamura? (.) 全て {subete, everything} good. [00:02:30.01]
34  Rina   I:|[ see.
             |((R smiles))
35  Kaho       [un| eh: uh
                  |((K nods as she looks at R))
36  Rina   えっと {eh (.) tto::, well} fo- (..) when i[s your:
37  Kaho                                              [un
38  Rina   basketball practice? [00:02:40.26]
39  Kaho   AH うんと {unto::, well} <weeking::> (.) えっと {etto, well}
           <tuesday>? tu::esday. 木曜日 {mokuyoubi, Thursday}  tu:- eh (.) thur-
           thursday |da. ah thursday. [00:02:55.01]
                    |((K looks at R to confirm and R nods))
40  Rina   I see. [00:02:56.11]
```

Note. The topic for this performance test was "My favorite activity."

After they established that Kaho's favorite activity is to play basketball in Line 20, Rina asked three unscripted follow-up questions, as shown in lines 26 ("*why*"), 32 ("*tell me more*"), and 36 to 38 ("*when is your basketball practice?*"), on top of the questions that she prepared. In Line 24, they establish that Kaho's role model is Yuki Kawamura, a Japanese professional basketball player. After Rina shows interest in Line 25, she asks why in Line 26 to ask about the reason for Kaho's choice of role model. Her interest in knowing more about Kaho's role model continues as she asks to tell [her] more in Line 32. Kaho's use of laughter after both questions in lines 27 and 33 shows that those questions were unexpected for Kaho.

Table 1. Rina's reflection during the October performance test

Category	Comments
Reflections during recursive practice	(1) *I will expand the topic by giving spontaneous comments if I come up with it on the spot, even if it's something that is not on the card.* (2) *I want to ask various questions that are not "what else?" and "why" to match my partner's story.* (3) *I want to ask more questions because I was not able to help my partner when they were in trouble.* (4) *I will ask more questions because the conversation broke down.* (5) *We were able to talk a lot without going off topic.*
Comments on the reflection log for the performance test	(1) *I was able to expand the talk by using things that I have learned so far.* (2) *I was able to come up with some questions that I had not prepared beforehand on the spot. I started to get a feeling of talking to foreigners.* (3) *Sometimes, when it comes to the speaking test, I end up using rejoinders without thinking about their actual meaning, so I want to use them appropriately. I want to be able to expand the conversation and have fun talking.*

Note. The comment categories for comments on the reflection log were: (1) Overall impression of the video shoot, (2) What is something that went well/things you worked hard on?, and (3) What do you want to do better next time?

Lines 36 to 38 show Rina's third spontaneous follow-up question, which is "*when is your:... basketball practice?*" She mentioned in her reflection during recursive practice that she wanted to *expand the topic by giving spontaneous comments if [she came] up with it on the spot* (Table 1). This topic expansion was something that we did not work on in class. She was able to recognize her accomplishments and reflected on them in her reflection log for the performance test as follows (Table 1).

> "I was able to come up with some questions that I had not prepared beforehand on the spot. I started to get a feeling of talking to foreigners."

It indicates that Rina was able to benefit from reflection time during the performance test through recursive practices.

In December, Hiro was able to ask follow-up questions (Excerpt 2). It starts off with Rina asking for the reason why Hiro chose Anpanman chocolate in his ideal dish, banana parfait, in Line 40. As they establish the reason, Hiro asks if Rina also likes bananas and banana parfaits in lines 47 and 51 to 53, even though Rina is trying to finish the interaction in lines 50 and 54 because of the time.

Excerpt 2: Hiro's use of follow-up questions (December)

```
[00:03:35.20]
(3.8)
40  Rina   えっと {etto, well} why did you choose America(ha)n
    An(ha)pan(ha)man [ch(ha)co
41  Hiro             [違う {chigau, that's not what I told you} JAPAN
    [00:03:45.29]
42  Rina haha あそっか {°a so(ha)kka°, oh that's right} Japa(ha)n Anpanman
    choco (chocolate) [00:03:50.15]
43  Hiro   (5.0) えっと えっと {etto etto::, well} >delicious< [00:03:59.28]
44  Rina   tell me more [00:04:01.21]
45  Hiro   (2.0) (      ) >yummy<  ha [00:04:04.27]
((R laughs for five seconds))
46  Rina   ni[ce
47  Hiro     [DO YOU LIKE BANANA? [00:04:11.10]
48  Rina   ye(ha)s [00:04:13.12]
49  Hiro   do [you like
50  Rina      [nice talking (     )=
51  Hiro   =do you like banana? [00:04:17.05]
52  Rina   ye[s
53  Hiro     [parfait? [00:04:18.06]
54  Rina   yes nice talking with you
55  Hiro   you too [00:04:21.10]
```

Note. The topic for this performance test was "My ideal dish."

During the reflection of recursive practices, Hiro had written the two questions ("*Do you like banana?"* and *"Do you like banana?...parfait?*") as a reflection, saying "*I should have asked* 'Do you like banana?'" and "*I will ask* 'Do you like banana parfait?'", indicating that they were prepared beforehand (Table 2). However, it is worth mentioning that this was the first appearance of Hiro's use of unscripted follow-up questions during performance tests.

On the other hand, Rina asked an unscripted follow-up question within the context without disrupting the flow of the interaction (see Excerpt 3). Before Excerpt 3, Kaho introduced *omu-rice* as her ideal dish, which includes several ingredients such as onions, eggs, and chicken. In Line 19, Kaho says that "*onion? is from Awaji shima?*".

However, after a 2.0-second pause, she asks "*where is Awaji shima*" in Line 20, which leads to Kaho attempting to understand the meaning of the question in Line 21. Since Rina was able to shadow the word *Awaji Shima* clearly and commented "*nice*", it indicates that she was familiar with the name of the island but was not sure of the location.

Excerpt 3: Rina's use of unscripted follow-up questions (December)

```
[00:01:49.07]
19 Kaho  onion? is from Awaji shima? [00:01:52.19]
20 Rina  Awaji shima. nice. (.) えっと {etto:, well} |(2.0) ↓I- where is
   Awaji shima [00:02:02.25]
                                                    |((R looks at her
   conversation card))
21 Kaho  どこの淡路島 {°dokono awaji shima?, where in Awaji Island?} 淡路島の
   {awaji shima no°, inside awaji shima} AH えっと {etto:, well} これ {kore,
   this} eh これか {koreka, this one} | (0.8) °where is Awaji shima°?=
   [00:02:14.00]
                                        |((K looks at R for clarification))
22 Rina  えっと {=etto, well} 淡路島はどこにあるか {Awaji shima wa doko ni
   aruka=, where Awaji Island is} [00:02:16.18]
23 Kaho  =AH::: えっと {ETTO, well} (.) it's <Hyo::u>go? Hyogo | (2.0) えっと
   {etto, well} 渡るとこみたいな {°wataru toko mitaina°, like the place you
   cross}
                                                          |((K gestures
   a bridge))
    (     ) 繋がって {tsunagatte-, it's connected} ah:: | <NEar:> (.) near
                                                   |((K tries to explain
   by gesturing))
    Shikoku. near Shikoku (.) Awaji shimA near Shikoku [00:02:37.19]
    ((R nods hesitantly))
24 Kaho  haha (          )
25 Rina  near Shikoku
```

Note. The topic for this performance test was "My ideal dish."

In the reflection for recursive practice, Rina mentioned that *[she was] glad that [she] could ask what [she] was curious about* after talking with Kaho, indicating that she asked the question because she was genuinely curious about the location of the island (Table 2).

Table 2. Reflection during the December performance test

Name	Comments
Rina	*(1) I will talk fluently so that I do not go over time.* *(2) I felt like I wanted to continue the conversation because I was not sure what I should say at the end.* *(3) I was able to continue the conversation more than the last one. I want to use rejoinders and continue the conversation more.* *(4) I was able to ask what I was curious about.*
Hiro	*(1) I should have asked* "Do you like banana?" *(2) I will say* "I like banana" *the whole time.* *(3) I will ask,* "Do you like banana parfait?"

DISCUSSION

The data suggest that reflective practices positively impacted students' development of self-awareness towards the use of their unscripted follow-up questions to expand the topic, as shown in the transcriptions and students' written reports. Unfortunately, I was not able to ask the students how they felt about reflective practices, but some of the students made positive comments about the change in their speaking ability, as Kaho said, "*As we kept studying, I was able to improve myself gradually and speak English confidently*." Considering their age, it might have been challenging for them to recognize and appreciate the power of reflection in learning; however, it did not stop them from actively participating and making use of recursive practices. It clearly supports the positive impact of reflective practices on students' ability to interact in their L2.

Through this project, I was able to reconfirm my belief that reflection is one of the powerful and effective tools for learners' development regardless of their age. Even though there are some limitations, such as a small sample size and a lack of diversity, this experience has provided me with another tool to support my students' language learning journey.

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APPENDIX

Transcribing convention (Jefferson, 2004)

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Collaboration in the Classroom and Beyond: 15 Years of Collaboration for the Development of Learner Autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on my school days, I always enjoyed our chat time with my friends and even looked forward to recess, although it was only for 5-10 minutes. Unlike today's digital society, we did not have our own gadgets then, so we thought face-to-face communication was the only and most important way to have a direct conversation with each other. It was a trivial conversation, but we better understood each other and increased our trust through these shared moments. Given that I enjoyed such non-digital school days, it is weird to see my students only looking at their smartphones during recess and paying little attention to their classmates coming to class. I wondered since I started seeing this scene and cared about it. The COVID-19 pandemic would have been a strong contributor to some extent, but I remembered that I had seen such uncomfortable sights in my class even before the pandemic. It was in 2010 when I first started teaching at the university. In the first semester, I had students work in pairs and then divided them into groups of four. I intended to have students share what they discussed with the other pairs verbally, but I saw some groups exchange pieces of their notes with each other to share what they had discussed without saying anything. Were they visual learners? Should I respect their learning style preferences? That was my first thought as a novice university teacher. It was such a shocking and impressive episode that I still recall it whenever I try to shift from pair work to group work in my class.

These days, modern young people are called "Generation Z", but there must be something that remains the same no matter what era we live in, and what teachers should value and emphasize. One of them is the importance of collaboration. Unlike group work which is just a group of people in which some people easily become free-riders, collaboration includes cohesiveness and people are more accountable to each other. In Japan, groups ("*han*") are prevalent mainly in elementary schools, with many group activities inside and outside the classroom. *Han* are created based on seating position, and each han consists of about five members. *Han* members study, clean the classroom, and eat school lunch together. After junior high school, the existence of the group begins to fade. However, group activities are closely related to both classroom and extracurricular activities from junior and senior high school to university and collaboration has been at the core of my teaching at any educational institution. My collaborative practice started in a single classroom at a junior and senior high school, but gradually expanded to include collaboration across classes and universities between Japan and overseas. This paper overviews my 15 years of research and teaching practice with a particular focus on collaboration and discusses its outcomes, issues, and future directions.

COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM LEADING TO AN OUT-OF-CLASS ACTIVITY: GROUP JOURNAL WRITING

Drawing from numerous books and papers on collaborative learning (e.g., Johnson and Johnson, 1999), I have found many opportunities for collaborative learning in the classroom since I started teaching in junior and senior high schools. As a novice English teacher, I introduced a journal writing project as part of a writing course and communicated with about 40 second-year high school students in English (see Hayashi, 2011, for details). Modifying and expanding the journal writing project, my first collaboration attempt at the university level was "Group Journal Writing". As part of a compulsory English course for first-year students, it was introduced as an out-of-class activity for 25 students. I made seven groups of 3-4 members each, and the students were told to write anything in a group notebook and pass it to one of the group members. Each member received their notebook in class, wrote their entry in English outside of class, and passed their notebook onto the next member the following week. As I wanted to observe how the students engaged in the group collaborative project, I did not intervene in any of the groups. At the end of the first semester, it was found that some groups were successfully engaged, regularly passing their notebook around within the group, while others failed to communicate with each other and even lost their notebooks. As a case study, one of the successful groups was selected for analysis (see Hayashi, 2014, for details). The project was closely related to group dynamics; success and failure depended on each member's responsibility, motivation, and, more importantly, group engagement.

COLLABORATION ACROSS COURSES: LETTER WRITING PROJECT

In 2019, my colleague and I engaged in a collaborative project in our elective extensive reading courses (Hayashi and Banno, 2019). The purpose of the project was for the students in each class to write a letter recommending a book for extensive reading and provide a collaborative learning opportunity across courses. A preliminary questionnaire found that almost none of the students had ever written a letter in English, and very few had ever written one in Japanese. To get off to a smooth start, my colleague and I prepared a letter format for outgoing and reply letters in both English and Japanese. In addition, we created a bilingual "collection of expressions" that summarized expressions commonly seen in reports written by our former students and distributed the two materials in class. When forming pairs, we considered the students' English proficiency levels and paired students of similar levels together. To alleviate the students' anxiety, we told them that English, Japanese, or both would be fine. After finishing the letter, the students wrote their partner's name on the envelope and posted it in a small mailbox placed at the front of the classroom (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mailbox

After students had posted their letters, my colleagues and I exchanged the letters with each other and handed them to the students in each class. Although it was introduced as part of the classroom activities, my colleague and I considered writing a letter to be confidential. Hence, each of us asked the students in advance if it was okay to check the contents of the letters. Most students responded that they had no problem with teachers viewing their work, but a few students did not approve.

Once the students received a letter from their partners, they read the recommended book and wrote a reply letter based on a prepared letter format. Writing letters to people they had never met was like pen pal correspondence, giving students a feeling of excitement. Since this collaborative activity was introduced as part of the class, teachers were able to keep track of students' submissions. There was no problem if students submitted their letters on time, but when they were late submitting their work, their partners had to wait longer to receive a reply, which sometimes caused them anxiety. Despite the teachers' reminders, a few students did not submit their work. The process became cumbersome because it involved a total of four exchanges. However, through this collaborative activity, students provided many positive comments, such as "I could learn how to write letters" and "I enjoyed interacting with students from the other class." About five years have passed since the initial attempt, yet the collaborative letter activity continues using the same materials.

COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM: JAPANESE WRITING ACTIVITY WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The form of collaboration gradually changed, and collaboration with international students has also been included since 2012. One is a collaborative activity about extensive reading. My colleague and I have taught extensive reading courses for international students and Japanese students, respectively. As part of the course activities, we had a collaborative session once or twice per semester for Japanese and international students to introduce their favorite Japanese/English books. Moreover, a contest related to extensive reading was held. Students were asked to express their recommendations for favorite extensive reading books using pictures and text on postcard-sized paper and both international and Japanese students voted for works they had thought were good. On another occasion, groups of Japanese students created an original book for international students and read it aloud to them in class (see Hayashi, 2013, for details).

A new type of collaborative activity was carried out in the first semester of 2025. It was a collaboration between the first-year seminar for Japanese students in the Faculty of Business Administration and the writing course for international students. Their Japanese proficiency level was intermediate. In one session, Japanese students and international students worked together in groups to write an essay in Japanese. The topic of the essay was "a person I admire," which the international students had been thinking about. Each group, consisting of one international student and two to three Japanese students, proceeded with the task. The international students typed their essays while receiving detailed and thoughtful advice from the Japanese students on the content, structure, Japanese expressions, and writing rules. It was impressive to see them actively communicating with each other in Japanese and English, using gestures and hand movements. In the latter half of the class, the completed essays were divided into several parts and read aloud by the entire group. The Japanese students gave careful advice on the pronunciation of each word and the timing of pauses.

Figures: Collaboration between international students and Japanese students (with students' consent)

One seminar student commented:

> *Helping with writing was surprisingly difficult, and I chose my words more carefully than usual because I did not want to teach incorrect Japanese. Teaching others allowed me to view Japanese objectively, and I realized the difficulty of Japanese that I do not usually notice, such as the difference between the three types of characters or how a few characters can change the meaning significantly. At the same time, I felt proud that Japanese is my native language. Thinking about how international students are studying Japanese diligently in Japan, far from their home countries, I felt that I should also challenge myself in various ways as a university student. I do not know if I will study abroad, but I want to broaden my horizons by visiting various countries with my own eyes while still a university student.* [translated from the original Japanese by the author]

This collaborative activity allowed this student to reexamine her relationship with the Japanese language. Through her interactions with an international student of the same age who has come to study in Japan, she developed a positive attitude that encourages her to take on new challenges. For future research, we would like to try to analyze the conversations among students within each group and conduct a qualitative analysis of the content of the essays they created together.

COLLABORATION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: COLLABORATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

My collaborative attempt went beyond the classroom in 2020. It was a great honor to have an opportunity to give a joint plenary with Dr. Leena Karlsson from the University of Helsinki at ILA 2019 in Kobe. The title of our plenary was “a collaborative reflection on our professional journeys with learners’ voices” and the plenary itself was the first collaborative attempt at ILA (see Hayashi & Karlsson, 2018, for details). An encounter with Leena stimulated my idea of collaboration, and we had already started exploring the possibility of a collaborative project for our Finnish and Japanese students during our stay in Kobe. As we talked things through, we came up with an autonomous learning project and some possible activities were book discussions, English chat time, and a pen-pal program. We agreed to have students choose an activity that they like. It was conducted entirely voluntarily outside of class. When we announced this project in our classes, 20 students (10 Finnish and 10 Japanese) showed interest. The teacher formed ten pairs, considering preferred communication activities. This activity began with Finnish students sending emails to their Japanese student partners. Like the group journal writing activity, teachers did not intervene in any pairs.

As a case study, one successful pair was selected for analysis (see Hayashi, 2022, for details). Yuki and Judy (both are pseudonyms) chose email messages and letters as their communication tool and interacted with each other 14 times over the four months. Holding both expectations of intercultural communication and anxieties about her English proficiency, Yuki embarked on the project and co-constructed their own communication style with Judy. However, Yuki’s obsession with formality and accuracy and recognition of her lack of communicative English contributed to the gradual decrease in the number of email messages. However, this helped her realize her needs and maintained, even enhanced, her motivation to study English. The study also sheds light on the necessity of providing well-balanced opportunities for students to learn and use both formal and informal English to encourage better communication (see Hayashi, 2019, for details). It is unclear whether their interactions are still ongoing, but if they are, I intend to conduct follow-up research to explore how they are continuing their exchanges and the factors driving their persistence.

COLLABORATION ACROSS UNIVERSITIES: COLLABORATION WITH HIROSAKI UNIVERSITY

In 2025, a new collaborative project started with Hirosaki University in Aomori. As a JACET Autonomous Learning SIG member, I had a chance to give a symposium with Professor Sanae Katagiri in 2020. Since then, we have enjoyed chatting about our teaching practice and exchanging ideas about autonomous learning. As both of us have common interests and teach similar classes, it did not take long to agree on initiating the collaborative project. Hirosaki University and Seikei University classes were titled “Guided Autonomous Learning” and “Self-directed English Language Learning”, respectively. Both were elective courses, and 8 and 20 students signed up for the courses, respectively. A total of six groups were made, but due to differences in the number of students enrolled, the groups consisted of one student from Hirosaki University and three to four students from Seikei University.

In the first semester of 2025, we embarked on a project and had the students in both universities interact with each other three times during the semester. Unfortunately, we could not schedule our classes for the same day and period due to academic reasons. However, we managed to have students from Hirosaki University participate online, using part of their lunch break time. Although there were time constraints, we could spare 20-30 minutes for the collaboration in each session. Using both Zoom and Teams as a platform, students in both universities were connected to talk about some topics that the teachers prepared, such as their English learning styles based on the questionnaire, their English learning goals, and problems they have faced in studying English. If there was time, they freely discussed things they wanted to talk about and questions they wanted to ask each other. Since the three sessions were conducted with the same members, the conversation became livelier with each session, and more smiles were seen.

Figures: Collaboration between Hirosaki University and Seikei University (with students' consent)

After the third session, one Seikei student (Yuto, pseudonym) commented:

> *Ms. Tanaka (pseudonym) from Hirosaki University said that she set her own tasks and clear deadlines and used her spare time to study. I sometimes set tasks for myself, but I do not often set clear deadlines for my studies, so I decided to try to learn from Ms. Tanaka's attitude of disciplining herself to study.* [translated from the original Japanese by the author]

Yuto has recognized what he lacks compared to Ms. Tanaka and is considering how he can incorporate it into his own studies. One of the characteristics of 'good' language learners is to "find their own way, taking charge of their learning" (Rubin and Thmpson, 1983: 132). Through interaction with her, Yuto sees the traits of a successful English learner in Ms. Tanaka. This collaboration has provided Yuto with an opportunity to enhance his awareness of his strengths and weaknesses, prompting him to reexamine his study habits and develop concrete improvement strategies. Furthermore, it is evident that Ms. Tanaka, who is almost the same age as Yuto and shares her keen interest in English, has become a "near peer role model" (Murphy, 1998).

Another Seikei student (Takashi, pseudonym) pointed out:

> *Through the joint class with Hirosaki University, I learned that people at distant universities also have similar concerns, and it was good to be able to share our concerns, study methods, and goals.* [translated from the original Japanese by the author]

Although Hirosaki and Tokyo are physically distant, the students felt closer to each other through their online connections, which seemed to strengthen their sense of shared identity as fellow English learners. Moreover, Takashi's comments imply the potential for a community of learning collaboratively created by learners for the development of learner autonomy. The outcomes of the project, including the details of each group's interactions, are currently being analyzed, and further detailed results of the project will be reported at another opportunity.

CONCLUSION

Over the past 15 years, I have set up and developed a variety of collaborative projects, some of which have transformed over time. Considering the course objectives and needs of students, the collaborative project, which I first started at the local level, was gradually expanded to the global level. Not all collaborative activities were successful in fostering learner autonomy, especially in out-of-class collaborative activities, and there is room for improvement. However, as agents, most students engaged in the collaborative projects and co-constructed their own communication style as they established their relationships and shared their emotions. My colleagues and I were also mutually and actively engaged in the whole collaboration process, modifying parts of the projects and exploring further possibilities. The success of all the projects was a collaborative endeavor for both students and teachers.

Thanks to the development of technology, we can be more easily connected both domestically and internationally. With globalization advancing, it is important to develop an attitude that recognizes the connection between individuals and the world. Together with the benefits of digital society, I would like to continue considering opportunities for collaborative learning that also focus on the merits of analog methods, such as letters. Considering the various means of communication available today, it is significant, especially for tech-savvy youth, to appreciate the diversity of modern communication methods and means, understand their differences and characteristics, and acquire the ability to use them appropriately according to the purpose and needs. While valuing collaboration among colleagues, my collaborative journey to explore various forms of collaborative learning for students continues.

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