

Performance Tasks as Mediation to Communicating in English and as Enhancing Language Learner Engagement

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November 16, 2020

Abstract

This paper discusses whether technology-based performance tasks could become a mediator to communicating in English and enhance language learner engagement. The present study investigated how low-proficiency Japanese English-language learners could change their attitude toward communication in their target language by completing a performance task involving making and presenting a digital portfolio. Such students should need to mediate between themselves linguistically and contextually when completing a performance task for communication. The study adapted two types of questionnaires: open-ended questions about the performance task and four Likert-type questions about L2 learning motivation. Twenty-five students completed the questionnaires. The present study asked the students to answer each questionnaire twice, once at the end of the first semester and once at the end of the second semester. The data from the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively from a phenomenological research perspective, while the data collected from the four Likert-type questions were statistically analyzed. The students' comments on the task showed that they positively engaged in the performance task throughout the two semesters by reflecting on themselves as English learners, with some difficulty mediating themselves in L1 and L2. However, the results of the Likert-type questionnaire suggested that such positive engagement would not necessarily lead to simultaneous English learning motivation. The results indicate that the task might become a "headstream" of directed motivational current (DMC) for the students.

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the Likert-type questionnaire suggested that such positive engagement would not necessarily lead to simultaneous English learning motivation. The results indicate that the task might become a “headstream” of directed motivational current (DMC) for the students.

Key words:

Performance task, mediation, language learner engagement, directed motivational current

1. Introduction

The present study investigated whether Japanese university students with low English language proficiency could enhance their language learner engagement by mediating themselves linguistically in Japanese and English as well as contextually in a certain learning environment through a performance task. Many Japanese universities must admit students with low proficiency in English (CEFR A1) due to a variety of admission requirements. Many practices for such low proficiency students in Japanese universities appear to be aimed at imparting linguistic knowledge first rather than improving communicative abilities (e.g., Nakamura, 2005). However, given Japanese educational situation, it seems that many Japanese learners lack experience of communicative practices in English classes as well as experience using English outside of the classroom (Toyoshima, 2016), particularly with regard to expressing themselves in English at the CEFR A1 level. It is assumed that many persons at that level should have difficulty engaging in communicative tasks in English due to their lack of experience coupled with their anxiety about their proficiency. Thus, this study introduced a performance task, namely making and presenting a digital portfolio about various topics related to textbook materials, for the students to mediate themselves in order to communicate in English and enhance their engagement in the task. The task was conducted in a university English class for first-year students with the computer assisted language learning (CALL, hereafter) system. This study will investigate how the students’ language learner engagement was enhanced in completing the task by adopting a questionnaire with open-ended questions and applying the phenomenological research perspective. Posing a subsidiary question, the study will also investigate whether such experiences led to a change in L2 learning motivation by adapting a questionnaire with statistical analysis. Finally, pedagogical and research implications will be discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Mediation to communicate and engage in language learning

Most second/foreign language (SL/FL) learners who started learning in formal educational settings have lived in their L1 world while acquiring their L1 and establishing their L1 selves. This means that such learners are already able to engage in self-mediation by activating their L1 when interacting with their peers or by themselves (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999; DiCamilla & Antón, 1997). Sociocultural theory, which has been applied for SL/FL pedagogies (e.g., Lantolf, 2000), claims that language, i.e., interactions, is significantly connected to thought, i.e., cognition; that is, language is the principal semiotic tool for mediating our thoughts, both on the social and the individual plane. Hence, depriving L2 learners of L1 entails depriving them of two efficient tools for learning - “the L1 and effective collaboration” (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999, p. 245). This suggestion follows Vygotsky’s (1986) concept of learning a foreign language: “In learning a new language, one does not return to the immediate world of objects and does not repeat past linguistic developments, but uses instead the native language as a mediator between the world of objects and the new language” (p. 161). Grenfell and Harris (1999, p. 43) summarized the concept as follows:

The L2 learner is thrust into an “unknown” linguistic environment. Ideas have to be expressed there, and ideas can be found there. Moreover, the means to express these can also be found there. Finally, the whole learning experience is... problematic, so that developing a linguistic competence is very much about *mediating* or *control* with respect to *the world* (the language to express and direct it), *others* (the language to understand and develop relationships), and *self* (to express what one needs to say about oneself and how to act) (emphasis added by the present author).

In adult L2 learners with low proficiency, the process of “the whole [array of] learning experiences” might be

more “problematic” than that of other levels of learners, as they might have low willingness to communicate in their L2 (e.g., Tan & Phairot, 2004), so that they need to “mediate” or “control” themselves between the L1 and L2 worlds by activating both languages to learn and communicate in the L2.

The discussion above was developed in the 21st century in terms of language learner engagement (Mercer, 2019; Svalberg, 2018). Svalberg (2018) illustrates the figure of the place of engagement with language (EWL) and the mediation between EWL and the other types of engagement, i.e., contextual and task engagement, considering classroom learning contexts (p. 27). She discussed the EWL as included in task engagement (and it will be included here in contextual engagement); it comprises para-linguistic features, kinetic involvement, and language use in L1, L2, L3, or more (expecting the effectiveness of sociocultural theory, e.g., inner/private and social speech or the zone of proximal development). Further, the three components of task engagement are interdependent and interact, although the proportion depends on the learning condition or situation. Mercer (2019) argued that L2 learners meditate between “ecologies of engagement” consisting of language, institution, class, and task, and antecedents of language learner engagement (see 2.2 below) by experiencing “emergent engagement” (p. 657). The discussion here suggests that L2 learners should mediate themselves linguistically and contextually to communicate in their target language.

2.2 Theoretical features of language learner engagement

The definition of “engagement” must be very simple: learner’s “actions” driven by something or someone (Mercer, 2019). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) explained this action as “active participation and involvement in certain behaviors,” including external (observable) and internal (cognitive and emotional) engagement (p. 2, original emphasis). This engagement is distinguished from language learner motivation; that is, “Motivation is about intent, whereas engagement is about action” (Mercer, 2019, p. 645). For example, well-motivated language learners may not necessarily engage in learning a target language or participate in pedagogical tasks positively (Mercer, 2019), or even if students seemingly engage in a task positively, not all of them positively engage internally due to low motivation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Oga-Baldwin (2019) also claimed that engagement should differ from motivation or “intended effort.” That is, engagement means learners’ exact actions, which emerge from their emotions or thoughts, even if the intended effort does not always lead to the intended goal; this can be described as “Motivation is will and intention, [and] wanting and wishing, [while] engagement is the moment when word turns to deed” (p. 3).

However, without intent, action would not occur, i.e., engagement and motivation would be interrelated, or they would include common factors (Mercer, 2019; Noels *et al.*, 2019). Mercer (2019) defined engagement as action predated by motivation or willingness to engage cognitively and affectively (p. 645). On the other hand, in their motivation process model, Noels *et al.* (2019) suggested that engagement was conceptualized as the action component of motivation, explaining that engagement should reflect a learner’s motivation to complete a task or acquire language materials. Thus, the antecedent of engagement must be the same as that of motivation: a construct of a learner’s self, to apply Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) (Mercer, 2019; Noels *et al.*, 2019). Adopting SDT, Mercer (2019) listed the antecedent of engagement as competence with respect to one’s sense of self (such as self-efficacy and self-concept), mindsets emerging from the sense of self (a set of beliefs about one’s capability or the difficulty one may experience with regard to acquiring a new language, and so on) (Lou & Noels, 2019), autonomy (a learner’s sense of some degree of control, supported by volition and willingness), and relatedness to significant others (with a sense of security, comfort, and social support). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) developed this discussion for practitioners, encouraging them to consider the following four aspects to construct and facilitate language learner engagement: (1) regard the learner’s mindset as the learner’s internal (intrapersonal) facet, including sense of self or competence; (2) the rapport relationship between teacher and learners to enhance learner autonomy; (3) the conscious raising of classroom dynamism and culture for learners to establish a good relationship (interpersonal facet); and (4) the development of pedagogical tasks for learners’ sustainable engagement. In addition, Noels *et al.* (2019) claimed that language learner engagement interacts with the learner’s self, which includes competence, autonomy, and relatedness as psychological need or satisfaction, as well as intrinsic, extrinsic (integrated, identified, introjected, and external), and amotivation as orientation,

to use SDT terminology (p. 100). Thus, engagement and motivation should be differentiated but viewed as interacting with each other.

The discussion of the relationship between engagement and motivation should lead to another discussion about directed motivational currents (DMCs) (e.g., Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016; Henry, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016). DMCs are defined as “goal-directed engagement and hence they function by allowing the individual to invest a substantial amount of their energy toward a final goal which needs to be perceived as personally valuable and deserving to be heartily sought after” (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 258). Dörnyei et al. (2016) explained that a DMC with positive, exciting emotion provides not only a direction for action but also “*energizes* action”, which would enable language learners to be highly productive for prolonged lengths of time and perform what they might have believed themselves capable of, or even exceed their own expectations (p. xi, emphasis in original). However, Dörnyei *et al.* (2016) and Henry (2019) claimed that a discussion of DMCs must differ from the “motive-causes-behavior temperament,” as discussed above, i.e., “The outworking of the initial motive becomes *part of the energy source* itself,” and therefore, the initial motive and subsequent behaviors are unified with and inseparable from each other (Dörnyei, Henry, and Muir, 2016, p. xii, emphasis in original). DMCs would also possibly emerge in the language learning classroom, and Dörnyei *et al.* (2016) have claimed that DMCs are “*The optimal form* of project engagement, which, to a certain extent, are *approximated* in long-term motivated behaviors in general;” they also assert that DMCs are “components of a framework for effective classroom motivational interventions to promote long-term learning” (p. xiii, emphasis in original). Therefore, the “unified construct” of motivation and engagement with DMCs both inside and outside the classroom should empower language learners to learn a target language over a long time.

2.3 Task design conducive to language learner engagement

Tasks for learning a target language have included authentic or nearly real-world aspects that learners face in their own world, even in pedagogical situations, in order to let learners engage in the tasks in interesting, positive ways (e.g., Ellis, 2017; Kormos & Wilby, 2019; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Svalberg, 2018). Intrinsic motivation significantly influences task engagement (Dörnyei, 2002), but at least the content of the task, which would lead to positive attitudes toward the course, must be interesting and authentic for learners in the situated learning context (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, & Lambert, 2020). For learners in the classroom, the task’s learning content and language materials offered by the teacher are also authentic because the learning itself is exactly what is “real” for them (Met, 1998). However, task engagement must show alignment between inside and outside the classroom, which would stimulate students’ interest in the content and meaningfulness of learning a target language through the task (Ellis, 2017; Nunan, 1989; Svalberg, 2018). Practitioners have been facing the challenge of including both aspects of authenticity (practice or rehearse to survive in the real world) and pedagogy for language acquisition (psycholinguistic aspects in SLA theory) in a task (Nunan, 1989). Moreover, Svalberg (2018) claimed that the practice must let learners experience meaningfulness, including authenticity, mindsets, and enjoyment through engagement; she illustrated the condition of meaningfulness by showing the interactions between task values (purposefulness, utility, and enjoyment) and learner factors (linguistic, social, and individual) (p. 35). In addition, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) stated that tasks that would lead to sustainable engagement should include cognitive challenge, maximal enjoyment, something captivating and interesting, unpredictable progress, and a “staggered” goal.

As for engagement in language use during task performance, it is important to discuss who should design the task (Lambert, 2017). By comparing six studies published in *Language Teaching Research*, Vol. 2(6), Lambert (2017) wrote in an editorial in the issue stating that the proportion of a learner’s involvement in terms of task design, topic, content, details, and language should affect learner engagement in L2 use (Audrey, 2017; Butler, 2017; Kormos & Préfontaine, 2017; Lambert, Philip, & Nakamura, 2017; Phung, 2017; Qui & Lo, 2017). The same implication has been drawn out in other research and in the practical context (e.g., Dincer, Yesilyurt, & Noels, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2017; Svalberg, 2018). For young L2 learners in particular, self-determination and autonomy during task performance directly affect the “meaningfulness” of engagement in a particular

learning context (Svalberg, 2018), whereas task familiarity (topic and content) and the autonomy-supportive context provided by the teacher should be key factors for both young and adult L2 learners (Dincer, Yesilyurt, & Noels, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2017; Qui & Lo, 2017). These studies have indicated that such learner-generated task design—not only the topic or the content, but also learning equipment (e.g., learning through a social network) or the learning environment (e.g., online or face-to-face class)—would prevent learners from experiencing anxiety regarding task completion or their L2 proficiency level for conducting the task because they will be able to select what is suitable for themselves (e.g., Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016; Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Svalberg, 2018; Tran, 2018). Nevertheless, many pedagogical conditions should probably fix a certain syllabus to agree with each institution's or course's aims and requirements. However, Ellis *et al.* (2020) have claimed that teachers should have free choice of resources for tasks in some parts, considering their students' differing needs, as well as fluctuation and motivation and aptitudes in classroom dynamics (p. 207). These would include student-determined tasks, topics, and content and/or materials (Lambert, 2017). This argument concludes that if teachers trust students' task design, teachers should supervise their students so as to establish learners' L2 selves as antecedents of language learner engagement as well as determine how they mediate themselves linguistically and contextually (See 2.1 and 2.2).

3. Method

3.1 The pedagogical hypothesis and the research question

The previous studies discussed in the last section led to the hypothesis that it is possible that pedagogical tasks for English learning would influence learners' mediation to communicate in English and enhance their engagement in learning English. In particular, Japanese adult learners with low English-language proficiency might have negative impressions of the English language, negative L2 selves, low self-efficacy, and high anxiety, which in turn could lead to a low willingness to communicate (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008; Yasuda & Nabei, 2018). Thus, the present pedagogical study poses the following research question:

Is it possible for low proficiency English learners to enhance their engagement in communication in English through a language course if their learning experience includes a performance task that involves mediating themselves linguistically and contextually?

The study also poses the following subsidiary question to clarify the difference between language learner engagement and language learning motivation:

If learner engagement is enhanced by the classroom learning experience, would that then influence language learning motivation both inside and outside the classroom?

In this study, the performance task includes both aspects of “performance” (in the narrow sense) and “product” (work) (Tanaka, Mizuhara, Mitsuishi, & Nishioka, 2005).

3.2 Students

The students in this study were first-year students at a Japanese public university located about 100 km away from central Tokyo. They belonged to the sociology department, where about 150 students were registered in English courses, including general English and an English course with the CALL system. The students were divided into five classes depending on English proficiency, from CEFR A1 to B1. There were 30 students in this study whose English level was CEFR A1; they belonged to their department's lowest English proficiency group.

3.3 The teaching and research procedure

The class was conducted in a computer classroom with a CALL system. The textbook *Keynote 1* (Cengage, 2017) was adopted, and four units were planned for completion in one semester. The students made presentation slides to introduce themselves to the topics fixed by the teacher (the present author), all of which were related to the unit's themes (See Appendix 1), aimed at learning linguistic knowledge and allowing the students to practice four skills through each unit's materials. The teacher offered example slides for the students' reference. The presentation slides were called a digital portfolio. The students made a presentation

based on the portfolio called a portfolio session twice in one semester. A portfolio session is like a poster presentation at a conference; that is, half of the students stayed in their seats with a computer and presented their portfolios, and the other half moved around to listen to, ask questions, and give comments on several other students' portfolios. They took turns, so that both halves of the class had the opportunity to present their portfolios. The whole session was recorded with an integrated circuit (IC) recorder for assessment (one recorder was offered to each pair of students). After the session, they assessed each portfolio they listened to as an audience with a rubric, according to the three points (contents (match with the topic and interesting idea), visuals (design and appeal), and English (appropriateness)) and considering the two aspects (performance and product) of the performance task. They also self-assessed using the same rubric. The teacher assessed both aspects of the performance task for each student's portfolio and recorded sound. It is reasonable that the task should be semi teacher-generated, as the teacher let students decide the content of the portfolio (Lambert, 2017).

Some international exchange study program students from Scandinavian countries and England participated in the third session of the second semester, since the students in the class were expected to have more authentic communication with non-Japanese speakers in English to determine whether there had been any changes in their engagement. The international students listened to the students' presentations and provided feedback.

The present study adapted a Japanese-language questionnaire with open-ended questions to answer the research question as well as the four Likert-type questions in order to clarify the subsidiary question (see 3.1). The students were asked to answer the questionnaires once at the end of the first semester and once at the end of the second semester. Twenty-five students agreed to answer the questionnaire in both the first and second semester. They provided their students identification cards after being informed that they would not be treated disadvantageously in class.

The open-ended questions asked whether the students could express themselves through their portfolios in English, whether they could understand their classmates' portfolios and presentations, and what they thought about the task (see Appendix 2). The students were asked to answer the questions anonymously so that their responses would be frank and honest. However, the number of comments differed for each question because the students decided which questions to answer. Their responses emerged from their own existences as classroom phenomena in what is called "intentional meanings that presented themselves (manifested, appeared) in human consciousness through lived experiences," namely learning English in a particular context (Vagle, 2018, p. 31). Thus, the research applied phenomenological research perspectives, which claim that the researcher, i.e., the teacher, should have a "longstanding awareness about the importance of the research questions," recognize "the need for empathetic understanding and trust-building" with students, and engage in "imaginative and on-going reflection" or "see[ing] the world with [students'] eyes" (Bugler-Kisber, 2018, p. 63). The students' responses revealed the representativeness and authenticity of learners who showed their "intentional meanings" through their "lived experiences" of engaging in a particular task for English learning (Bugler-Kisber, 2018; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Mishler, 1990; Toyoshima, 2007; 2018; 2020; Vagle, 2018). The anonymity and the clear explanation of the research established trustworthiness or encouraged "trust building" between the students and the teacher/researcher, so that the students' comments would be true, representative, and reliable with respect to the authentic situation. Thus, such narrative data that emerged phenomenologically should be discussed in terms of authenticity and representativeness rather than in terms of validity and reliability (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Mishler, 1990; Toyoshima, 2007; 2018; 2020).

The four Likert-type questions included the following in L2 learning motivation, in reference to Yashima's (2002) study: the intercultural friendship orientation in English learning (reasons for learning English), motivational intensity, and desire to learn English. Due to their conciseness, the items should be suitable for investigating the subsidiary question. The present study treated intercultural friendship orientation in English learning as L2 motivation to learn English because the items pertaining to orientation, i.e., the reason for learning English, must be part of motivation, which is relevant to integrative motivation (Gardner

& Lambert, 1972), though the original study did not include it in L2 learning motivation.

3.4 Analysis

This study adopted content analysis to analyze the narrative data collected from the open-ended questions. The data were entered into an Excel sheet to compare the changes that occurred between the first and second times answering the questionnaire (Toyoshima, 2007; 2018; 2020). The data collected from the four Likert-type questions were statistically analyzed using a t-test to investigate the change between the first and the second datasets, depending on the categories mentioned in the last section.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. A digital portfolio as mediation to communicate

Via the open-ended questions, the students revealed positive attitudes toward communication in English through performance tasks. As listed below, some of the comments they made in the first semester showed that compiling and presenting portfolios caused them to reflect on themselves and understand each other more easily:

C1: Making the portfolio was an opportunity for me to reflect on myself. Listening to the others' presentations of their portfolios was an opportunity for me to learn about them. It was fun. C2: I felt at ease expressing myself when presenting my portfolio. I enjoyed the sessions where I could understand the others. C3: Making my portfolio was difficult for me because I had to find photos or illustrations to accompany the stories, and it was challenging looking up unknown words or structures in dictionaries to write explanations in English, but I enjoyed the sessions because I could express myself there.

C1, C2, and C3, among others, suggest that most of the students found the performance task meaningful in terms of understanding each other through the self-expression facilitated by the portfolios, although compiling the portfolios and presenting them in English constituted the most they could do in the two sessions in the first semester. In addition, the comments show that communicating with various people in class in the context of the portfolios was enjoyable for the students. This suggests that the students attempted to mediate the task and language engagement through contextual engagement, which encouraged them to reflect on themselves (Mercer, 2019; Svalberg, 2018; see 2.2).

Some comments made after the end of the second semester, when the students had experienced four portfolio sessions, show that the students not only considered how they could express themselves, but also how they could make themselves understood in English:

C4: It was fun for me to make the portfolio and think about how to help others understand it.

C5: I considered how to help others understand my portfolio by adding appropriate illustrations or a suitable letter font.

C4 and C5 imply that the performance task involving the digital portfolio would turn out to be mediation between each student and the others, considering the differences between them.

In addition, the student quoted below mentions having learned good portfolio and presentation practices from the other students:

C6: I very clearly identified the weakness in my portfolio and presentation from the other students during the sessions, so I could improve mine in the end.

C6 suggests that the student discovered that communication is a part of learning, and the digital portfolio would turn out to constitute mediation with respect to learning English as well as communicating in English.

However, in both the first and the second semester, the students who did not think that they could express themselves in English answered the open-ended questions (Question 1, see Appendix 2) by citing the reason as their lack of linguistic knowledge or being at a loss for words in interactions, as follows:

The first semester:

C7: I gave up on communicating what I wanted to because I couldn't say what I meant in English, even if I could in Japanese. C8: I couldn't say what I wanted to very well because English expressions translated from Japanese were difficult for the others to understand.

The second semester:

C9: I sometimes hesitated to speak up because I was worried that the others would not understand what I meant in English. C10: I couldn't say what I wanted to express in the sessions because I was anxious about my limited English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, but I could make my portfolio using words and expressions I already knew.

C7 and C8 suggest that the students had been struggling against the gap between their L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) worlds; that is, they attempted to apply L1 experiences to L2 (Grenfell & Harris, 1990), which would be difficult or almost impossible for them. C9 reveals one student's anxiety about communicating in English. Such struggles during mediation should be the gateway to acquisition; that is, a "sprout" of becoming a L2 user with multicompetence in L1, interlanguage, and L2 (Cook, 2008). They must go through the process to acquire English if they might not have experience with second-level education. On the other hand, C10 revealed one student's experience of personal achievement in the process of mediation while making and presenting the portfolio, although they also experienced anxiety about their lack of linguistic knowledge. The positive feeling of achievement or enjoyment while engaging in communication in English would be defined as a different dimension from English learning and utilization of anxiety, as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) discussed. The discussion here claims that the performance task would promote mediation between task, language, and context engagement by encouraging students to reflect on themselves and communicate with others in English through the task. It also claims that the students gradually realized the meaningfulness of the engagement, as the task might satisfy Svalberg (2018)'s model of meaningfulness (see 3.3), revealing a positive attitude in communication in English through the task, whereas mediation between L1 and L2 should be "problematic" and still cause students to struggle (Grenfell & Harris, 1990).

4.2 Establishing a self-concept to enhance language learner engagement in the classroom

Self-reflection and interaction with other students through the task might encourage students to recognize themselves as English learners. The comments on the task showed slight signs of change in students' self-concepts as English learners:

C11: The task was a good opportunity to think about myself and the others.

C12: I think I could express myself very well by reflecting on and learning about myself through this activity. Besides, it was a good experience for me to write about many topics.

C11 and C12, which were provided in the first semester, show that the performance task made the students reflect on themselves and turned out to be a good way to encourage students to make friends with each other, since they saw each other only once per week in this class. In other words, it is possible that students would start the process of establishing their self-concepts as L2 learners by engaging in social interactions through the task; these interactions became intersubjective activities with others (Toyoshima, 2007).

In the second semester, some students saw improvements in terms of the fluency of their communication as well as their engagement in the classroom through the experiences offered in the four sessions:

C13: It was sometimes hard but overall fun to make the portfolio. Besides, I felt myself getting faster at using English expressions than before. C14: I could check my English expressions objectively by writing on the portfolio slides, and I think that I could learn English more by taking part in the task than just listening to the teacher's lectures. C15: This class introduced "active learning" and helped me learn a lot because I could express myself clearly and learn about my classmates in English. C16: I could learn English enjoyably because it was very interesting to make and present my portfolio and listen to the others' present theirs.

C13 implies that the task might make students realize their own improvements in terms of L2 competence, which would be a key factor in establishing a sense of self and integrating the meaningfulness of learning English into the learners' selves (Toyoshima, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which would in turn be conducive to language learner engagement as well as intrinsic motivation (Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). C14, C15, and C16 suggest that students would realize what they should aim for as English learners; that is, they should learn English by taking on the role of agent and legitimate participant, rather than merely being recipients of knowledge during class, i.e., members of a passive or "empty" audience, even with low proficiency (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Firth & Wagner, 1997, 1998; Sfard, 1998). C14 and C15 also indicate that this performance task, as in John Dewey's (1938) "learning by doing," which forms part of task-based language teaching principles (Ellis *et al.*, 2020), would be preferred and suitable for learning engagement in the classroom and might yield an effective learning outcome. C16 shows that students could enjoy learning English by engaging in a task, which might energize language learner engagement as a DMC (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016; Mercer, 2019). The comments imply that the task would encourage the students to adjust their mindsets with regard to learning English: they might realize that the goal of learning English should be to achieve "something challenging and [develop] one's competences," rather than to get "good grades and [look] competent" (Mercer, 2019, p. 651). This might be because their performance was not evaluated in terms of English accuracy; rather, they were evaluated for appropriateness with regard to conveying the meaning. The discussion here suggests that the students would establish their self-concepts as English learners by engaging in the task, which would probably lead to their willingness to communicate in English.

4.3 The DMC headstream: A yet-to-be unified construct of engagement and motivation

The previous section suggested that the performance task would possibly influence the students' attitudes to English learning and enhance language learner engagement throughout the duration of the course. However, the results of t-tests, referencing Yashima's (2002) L2 learning motivation categories, show that the enhancement of language learner engagement in the classroom did not necessarily lead to L2 learning motivation (Table 1).

Table 1:

The result of paired sample test by the categories (Pair: First-Second, N = 25, df = 24)

L2 Learning Motivation 95

Categories Mean SD SE Lower Upper t p

1. -0.92 1.977 0.395 -1.736 -0.104 -2.326 0.029*
2. -0.76 3.419 0.684 -2.171 0.651 -1.111 0.277
3. -0.48 3.49 0.698 -1.92 0.96 -0.688 0.498

Note: * $p < .05$

L2 Learning Motivation categories: 1. Intercultural Friendship Orientation in English Learning (reasons of learning English); 2. Motivational Intensity; and 3. Desire to Learn English

The results suggest that language learner engagement and L2 learning motivation should be distinguished from each other, as previous studies have discussed (see 2.2 above), whereas the reason for learning English would change with the experience of learning English through the task. The reasons given for learning English in the first and second semesters in Motivation Category 1, intercultural friendship orientation in English learning, were significantly different ($p < .029$). This result suggests that more students in the class found that the reason for learning English should not only be to acquire linguistic knowledge in order to obtain the necessary credits for the English classes or to pass the examinations, but also to enable students to understand their classmates from various parts of Japan through their portfolios. During the first semester,

some students had already recognized the task as a good opportunity to learn about their classmates, as shown in the following comments about making and presenting the portfolios:

C17: It was good that we could move around to talk with many people in the sessions. It was also good that I didn't feel lonely in the class because we had to listen to at least four people talk.

C18: Everyone was so kind about helping me in Japanese, and we understood each other.

C17 and C18 probably obtained some positive social gains from learning English in terms of forging good friendships with other students. In addition, C18 activated L1 use as mediation for understanding.

Communication with international students in English in the third session, which was conducted in the second semester, might influence changes in students' orientation in English learning. At the end of the second semester, the students' comments on the portfolio session included their experiences of authentic communication with the international students in English and demonstrated their recognition of the differences among students:

C19: The session with the international students was a precious experience for me. They gave me good advice about my presentation, so I want to use English more confidently from now on. C20: The students' ideas and comments were interesting, and I found them different from each other. I think I learned about them more deeply.

C19 suggests that students' feelings of anxiety and incompetence in English would make them avoid communicating in English, as previous studies have shown (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008). Once students feel confident about communicating in English due to positive experiences in which they have made themselves understood in authentic situations, they are likely to be willing to communicate in English, even with low proficiency. C20, on the other hand, suggests that the students would realize the differences among students, including the international students, by expressing themselves via the digital portfolios in the second semester. This experience might influence changes in their intercultural friendship orientation through the task; in other words, they might realize that the reason for learning English should be to facilitate communication with others, including non-Japanese speakers, in order to get to know each other well.

However, the t-test results did not show a significant difference between the first and the second semester in L2 learning motivation categories, i.e., Category 2 (motivational intensity) and Category 3 (desire to learn English), both of which contain items that are relevant to integrative and intrinsic motivations to learn English independently (Yashima, 2002). It is possible that task engagement was driven by a sort of extrinsic motivation for some of the students; that is, completion was required for the students to pass the course, meaning that learning English through the task might not have been sufficiently internalized in their L2 selves to lead to them learning English intrinsically both inside and outside the classroom (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, the t-test results for the two categories might not have shown a significant change between the two semesters.

In addition, the task was teacher-generated, and the students were not allowed to select the task or choose the topics. Indeed, the following comment reveals dissatisfaction with the topics the teacher offered:

C21: I could not relate personally to the topic "Someone with a great talent," and I could not find an appropriate subject for the topic. I prefer topics of my own choosing, like "How about this dream job?"

C21 expresses one student's desire to be an agentic learner and their hope for the opportunity to select a topic. The comment suggests that topic unfamiliarity or authorized topic selection might affect students' engagement (Dincer et al., 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2017; Qui & Lo, 2017), hindering DMCs to L2 learning motivation (Dornyei et al., 2016, Henry, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016). Moreover, the following comments criticized the teacher's instruction and development of the task:

C22: I didn't have enough time to make my portfolio. The teacher should have introduced each topic earlier.

C23: I think the teacher should have explained the production of the portfolio in even more detail.

C22 and C23 reveal students' dissatisfaction with the teacher's instruction, even though the teacher, i.e., the present author, presented the topics in the course syllabus in advance and explained each topic in detail with examples. These feelings should affect students' attitudes toward the performance task, which would in turn influence their engagement (Lambert, 2017; see 3.3). For the students who gave C21, C22, and C23, their performances would not become a DMC or energize motivation, including learning outside the classroom.

Nevertheless, most of the comments and answers to the open-ended questions reveal positive attitudes toward the performance task, as introduced in Section 4. The final comment, quoted below, could be interpreted as expressing that student's sense of fulfillment or accomplishment with regard to engagement in the task after finishing the two sessions in the first semester:

C24: I believe that the experience of doing the two sessions turned out to be my "property." The activity attracted me very much in terms of the fact that many Japanese people should be poor at expressing themselves.

If the other students had a similar proprietary feeling toward the performance task, it might energize the students to enhance both their engagement and motivation. In other words, the performance task might be a DMC "headstream" before becoming a unified construct of engagement and motivation (Dornyei *et al.*, 2016).

5. Practical implication and further research

The present research yielded several findings for the present author as the students' English teacher. First, in the English class, most of the students behaved as agents and legitimate participants by mediating themselves in the learning context, the performance task, and with regard to the learning materials, in spite of their low English-language proficiency, whereas some of them revealed difficulty in mediating themselves in Japanese and English. This indicates that the performance task of making and presenting a digital portfolio could lead to the enhancement of language learner engagement in communication in English (Svalberg, 2018), although mediation between L1 and L2 might still be problematic and challenging for some students (Grenfell & Harris, 1999). It is therefore suggested that the teacher should demonstrate flexibility by letting the students create task content or topics to encourage them to enhance their language learner engagement both inside and outside the classroom; that is, practitioners should create a balance between learner- and teacher-generated content in task design, regardless of the educational situations or restrictions (see 2.3). Furthermore, support could be provided throughout the process in terms of linguistic aspects and task compression.

Second, more time might be needed for the performance task to become the students' DMC, rather than just a flow; that is, the students might engage in the task with "emergent motivation" to achieve completion, fostered by the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005, p. 603, quoted by Piniel & Albert, 2019, p. 583, emphasis in original), which might not lead to "continuous" or "intrinsic" motivation. In fact, the performance task seemed to satisfy the conditions for the students to experience flow, i.e., "a balance between perceived skills and perceived challenges," "a clear set of goals," and "clear and immediate feedback about their actions" (Piniel & Albert, 2019, p. 581, original emphasis, and also see the discussion in 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 above). If the students could experience such flows many times by subsequently engaging in similar tasks, they might obtain a unified construct of engagement and motivation (Dornyei *et al.*, 2016). Firm establishment of their L2 learner selves as the antecedents of learner engagement (Mercer, 2019, also see 2.2 above) might be required in order to achieve this.

Finally, as for the implications for further research on language learner engagement, practitioners as researchers should study the classroom as an ecological learning context and investigate participants in the situated learning place more deeply (Mercer, 2019). It is possible that different cases would yield different results and findings, even if the same task is adopted. The present study was exactly ecologically situated in an English classroom with a CALL system that was introduced for Japanese English-language learners with low proficiency at a local university in Japan, which would turn out to be one case of the "ecologies of engagement" that emerged from and certainly go back to the antecedents of learner engagement (Mercer, 2019, p. 657, also see 2.1). The more ecological and situated the research context for observing language

learner engagement, the more individual and subjective the outcome will be under a particular research condition (Svalberg, 2018). The present study investigated students' responses to open-ended questions to reveal the variety among students and show different reactions to the performance task, whereas the statistical analysis of L2 learning motivation showed only the group-wide changes between the two semesters. The study indicates that the phenomenological research method is suitable for investigating sensitive emotions in L2 language learners (Ibrahim, 2016; Piniel & Albert, 2019); it should therefore be suitable for investigating L2 learning motivation, though many studies have adopted quantitative research methods to clarify group tendencies.

Acknowledgement

I thank my students for understanding and cooperating to the present research. I also thank Tsuru University for financial support to conduct the present research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Topics of 'digital portfolio'

The first semester

1. Listen to My Favorite Music / Let's Watch My Favorite Movie
2. This is My "Must" Thing
3. How about this "Dream" Job?
4. Someone with Great Abilities

The second semester

5. Can I Introduce My Best Friend?
6. The Wildest Place in My Hometown
7. "I did it!"
8. I Want ... near the Campus! (each student put something in the blank)

Appendix 2: Open-ended questions (translated Japanese into English by the present author)

1. Do you think that you could express yourself in English by making digital portfolio?
2. Please write the reason of the question No. 1.
3. Do you think that you could make yourself understood by audience when you present your portfolio?
4. Do you think that you could understand your classmates through their portfolio and presentation?
5. Please write your comments on making and presenting digital portfolio freely.