Complexity in acting on images of ideal classmates in the L2 classroom

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Abstract

The current study endeavored to support learners in their transition to compulsory English as a foreign language lessons at a university in Japan. The study involved two classes of first-year science and technology students (N = 48). The action research initially explored students' ideals for the actions of classmates that they believed may facilitate the development of a learning group more conducive to communicative language learning. From the second lesson of semester and thereafter, these ideals were reintroduced to the classes which generated the ideas. Introspective participant journals were analyzed during the action research process and revisited as a whole after the semester of data collection. The article introduces the descriptors articulated by students at the start of their studies, their choices to act on these ideals over the semester, as well as their reflections on action in the classroom connected to ideals. The results provide insights into a complex understanding of the social negotiation of action in the L2 classroom based on ideas of ideal classmates. The article moreover suggests pedagogical benefits of the intervention towards assisting students to adapt to a new language learning class.

Keywords: action research; classroom L2 study; complexity perspectives; language learner psychology; reciprocal idealizing

1. Introduction

Alterations in life circumstances can be a tricky business at the best of times, let alone for those navigating the tumultuous seas of emerging adulthood. One of the major transitions for many is from secondary to tertiary education. Such movement often involves the disruption of existing relationships and the challenge of developing new, supportive friendships. Indeed, the importance of relatedness – "the psychological sense of being with others in secure communion or unity" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7) – to students' actions is well known. A review conducted by Meyer (2014) of past research in this area finds that learners' sense of relatedness with peers and teachers is associated with positive emotions, which in turn foster behavioral engagement in the classroom.

For many around the world, late adolescence to emerging adulthood also coincides with compulsory second language (L2) lessons as part of formal education. In Japan today, this requirement usually extends to the first two years of undergraduate programs in the form of English as a foreign language (EFL) lessons. Entering the new social context of a language classroom can engender anxiety about finding one's place (Sampson, 2016a). Additionally, fears about making a bad impression through being unable to express oneself accurately in the L2 and negative comparisons of ability with other students have been linked to longer-term feelings of frustration and helplessness (Williams & Andrade, 2008).

Given such concerns, the current study endeavored to support learners in their transition to communicative EFL lessons at a university in Japan. The action research drew on the idea of "reciprocal idealizing" (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukada, 2014). Murphey et al. (2014) argue that through encouraging learners to imagine "possible proximal classmates behaving positively toward the self (...) these idealizations can generate self motivations with behavioral outcomes" (p. 242). In other words, through drawing attention to the ways in which one would like *others* to act in the classroom, students *themselves* come to act in these ways. Adapting this conceptualization, at the start of the present study learners were asked to write down the ideal actions of classmates that would foster the development of a class group more conducive to communicative language study. The research then regularly reintroduced these ideals throughout the semester in the classes which generated them. It was anticipated that students might turn these ideals into engaged action with their peers. The article introduces the descriptors articulated by students at the start of their studies, their choices to act on these ideals over the semester, as well as their reflections on action in the classroom connected to ideals. The results provide insights into a complex understanding of the social negotiation of action in the L2 classroom based on ideas of ideal classmates. The article moreover suggests pedagogical

benefits of the intervention aiming to assist students in adapting to a new language learning class.

2. Literature review

2.1. Complexity in the social context of the L2 classroom

Dating back to Larsen-Freeman's (1997) seminal article, research built on complexity perspectives has been gradually gaining traction as a way of understanding L2 development, not least in the area of learner psychology in classroom language learning (see e.g., Dörnyei, MacIntryre, & Henry, 2015; Sampson, 2016a). Complexity thinking rejects "the principle of simplicity [which] either separates that which is linked (disjunction), or unifies that which is diverse (reduction)" (Morin, 2008, p. 39). Rather, complexity is argued to be:

> (…) a fabric (complexus: that which is woven together) of heterogeneous constituents that are inseparably associated: complexity poses the paradox of the one and the many. (…) Complexity is in fact the fabric of events, actions, interactions, retroactions, determinations, and chance that constitute our phenomenal world (Morin, 2008, p. 5).

Those in favor of complexity perspectives understand such a fabric as comprising interacting systems. In the field of L2 development, Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2016) consider complex systems as (i) having concrete phenomenological validity, (ii) being composed of multiple interacting parts, including an agent or agents, (iii) being open to adaptive feedback and nonlinear change, (iv) being part of the context that is also part of them, and (v) exhibiting emergent outcomes (p. 745). Such complex systems are said to reveal organized complexity (Weaver, 1948) in that interactions between components are not orderly and components themselves change through mutual adaptation. That is, these systems dynamically change over time in non-linear, relational ways – the same energy introduced through different areas of the system or at divergent points in time can result in radically different outcomes (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The system becomes an organized whole through these interactions. The collective behavior of the whole also iteratively feeds back to the behavior of components at different levels and across different timescales, as well as interacting with other, interconnected systems. Through such interactions and feedback processes, systems co-adapt as agents act on the context (including other agents) while the context also acts on agents (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Complexity perspectives therefore take a strong focus on dynamics and the ways in which systems evolve over time (Gleick, 1987).

One potential reason for the growing uptake of complexity perspectives in language learning research is that the L2 classroom is a complex space. In classroom language learning, individuals transport into the classroom their own psychologies and experiences (Sampson, 2016a; Ushioda, 2011; van Lier, 2004), coming together to focus on a particular domain of learning and interact to co-form the class group. This jointly created social context feeds back iteratively to influence the forms of behavior and understandings of the individuals making up the group – both in terms of students (Sampson, 2015, 2016a, 2019) and teachers (Sampson, 2016b). As Ushioda (2015) puts it, "learners are not simply located in particular contexts, but inseparably constitute part of these contexts", meaning that they "shape and are shaped by context" (p. 48). For instance, research by Sampson (2016a) uncovered that L2 students' in-class speaking and intentions to continue to speak in the future classroom related to co-adaptive perceptions of the actions of others in small group-work. Students' ideas of what is possible for themselves and others like them in the L2 domain, as well as action in the classroom, emerge dynamically out of their perceptions of and interactions with the material (e.g., lesson materials, tasks) and social environment (e.g., peers, teachers), in the context of their ongoing individual psychologies.

2.2. Idealizing the actions of others in the social context of the classroom

The complex, social context of the L2 classroom can also offer up particular fears and worries for students. Second language study anxiety has been linked with threats to self-image, as when learners sense an inability to present their ideas to the same level as in their native language or perceive negative evaluation by others (see e.g., MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Second language learning research has uncovered that anxiety is also aroused when learners make potentially skewed social comparisons, believing classmates to be more capable with an L2 than themselves (Williams & Andrade, 2008; Yoshida, 2013). Such worries may be exacerbated as learners transition from one stage of education to the next, or enter a new class group. Yoshida (2013) uncovered a kind of debilitating conflict between implicitly-held beliefs about what would be effective actions for L2 learning, and fears about saving face in front of new classmates.

The recent work of Murphey and associates (Murphey & Iswanti, 2014; Murphey et al., 2014) has directly addressed such challenges. These researchers draw on the concept of possible selves, which are "the ideal selves that we would very much like to become; they are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves are ideas or images of ourselves in the future that we may wish to work towards or avoid. They have been the focus of much empirical work, not least

in the form of interventions witnessing positive outcomes for academic motivation and achievement in general education (Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), as well as L2 learning (Mackay, 2014; Sampson, 2012, 2016a). A vital aspect of possible selves is that there are dynamic interactions between them and the social environment (Erikson, 2007; Markus, 2006). As Markus (2006) contends, "the social world, particularly peoples' relations with others, is very often the source of the materials for the creation of possible selves, and has a large hand in what, if anything, is done with them" (p. xii). Murphey and associates make use of this importance of the social context in the construction of possible selves. These researchers examine the ideas of L2 learners as they transition into a new learning group, encouraging them to explicitly consider their ideals for the kind of language learning peers with whom they would like to study in the social environment of the classroom – their "ideal L2 classmates".

Murphey et al. (2014) conducted a study with 449 students in their Japanese university EFL classes. At the start of a semester, they asked these learners to write freely about what a group of classmates would ideally do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably. Analysis led to the creation of 16 descriptors of ideal L2 classmates. Dependent on the individual teacher-researchers' circumstances, some of the groups participating in the study were shown these descriptors at an unspecified point in the semester. Then, at the end of the semester, students marked a Likert scale about the descriptors. There was also an open-ended section included in the survey. Results suggested that students generally believed strongly in the importance of each of the descriptors for learning. Learners most commonly reflected that they and their peers had enacted strategies connected to in-class participation, peer-to-peer assistance, and friendship formation. Finally, from the open-ended section of the survey, it was found that reintroducing the descriptors to students helped to raise awareness of what the researchers termed *reciprocal idealizing.* Learners became motivated to act in parallel with the ideals of others. For example, referring to the descriptors of ideal L2 classmates as "questions" in the survey, one student remarked that "It is very important to think what is a good way to study English. They are all very good questions, but it's important that I put these questions into action myself" (Murphey et al., 2014, p. 249). Another student was more explicit about idealizing: "I could know what is ideal person. Now I will try to be an ideal person" (p. 249).

A related study conducted with 46 adult learners in Indonesia (Murphey & Iswanti, 2014) used the same concepts to introduce more substantive change-action. After collecting descriptors of ideal classmates at the beginning of a school term, these ideals were reintroduced halfway through the term. For instance, Iswanti (as the class teacher) discussed with learners which of the descriptors they wished to act on as a class group, reminded students verbally

when they were acting in ways incongruent with their professed ideals, and posted descriptor word clouds around the classroom. Once again, a survey was then introduced at the end of term. Murphey and Iswanti (2014) compared results from the Japanese and Indonesian studies, through which some interesting similarities emerged. First, students from both contexts evaluated the descriptors as being very important for their engaged action in the classroom. Second, from the open-ended responses, learners in Indonesia once again described intentions to become an ideal classmate, as in the following example: "I hope I can be an ideal person who create the ideal situation in class" (p. 34).

2.3. Bringing the literature together with practice

My experiences as a teacher made me aware that learners often struggle to adjust and feel comfortable in transition to a new L2 classroom. My past research endeavors have also uncovered a variety of benefits to activities which help learners to become more conscious of possible selves (e.g., Sampson, 2012, 2016a). The work of Murphey and associates (Murphey & Iswanti, 2014; Murphey et al., 2014) therefore piqued my curiosity as both a teacher and a researcher. Their studies reveal that learners have clear imaginings of what they would like their classmates to be doing in a learning group conducive to language study – their "ideal L2 classmates". Their research also hints that inquiring about ways in which students would like their classmates to act can raise their own awareness of the importance of acting for others. However, based on complexity perspectives, Larsen-Freeman (2016) argues that "what is important for teaching and learning is not simply the presence of environmental influences; it is *how the agents [students, teachers] perceive them as offering the basis for action*" (p. 379; emphasis added). I wanted, therefore, to push forward the potential of this intervention by examining the qualities of learners' actions and reflective thinking connected to such ideals in-situ, at regular points over the course of their studies. I hence decided to employ action research to introduce change to my regular teaching. The following research questions emerged:

1. What do participants note as ideals for the actions of their classmates as they enter a new class group?
2. In what ways does reintroducing these ideals to a class group encourage participants to reflect on acting on specific ideals over time?
3. In what ways do participants' reflections reveal the complexity of acting on the ideals of others in the social context of the classroom?

3. Method

3.1. Setting and participants

The study was instigated at a regional university in Japan. Data were collected from 48 science and technology students, ranging in age from 19 to 21 years of age. Participants made up two first year, first semester compulsory English classes. The class groups involved a mix of males and females. The researcher was the teacher for these two classes. The groups were selected out of convenience, as practitioner action research is located in a social group of which the researcher is also a part. Lessons were held once a week, with a lesson focus on speaking and listening skills. The designated textbook provided listening tasks, such as improving understanding of reduced spoken forms, making inferences when listening, and listening for main ideas and details. These textbook exercises were supplemented by various communicative speaking activities at the teacher's discretion, such as free conversation and discussion with topic cards, using pop-music videos for story-telling activities, and working in pairs to negotiate the construction of a Lego model. As measured by a standardized test, student English ability levels ranged from approximately 400 to 750 points on the TOEIC.

3.2. Research approach

Those employing action research endeavor to understand social phenomena through the deliberate introduction of change to the status quo (Burns, 2010). The action research process comprises a series of consecutive research cycles (Lewin, 1948). A cycle commences with the perception of a challenging issue about which those inside a social group wish to deepen their understandings. *Change-action* is then developed, encompassing intervention beyond regular practice intended to further these understandings. Change-action is also aimed at fostering outcomes perceived as more beneficial to participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The understandings are subsequently reflected upon in order to instigate additional change-action. Each cycle in the process targets the expansion of knowledge about the original challenge or questions. A description follows of the cycles in the current study.

Cycle 1: Collecting student ideals for the actions of their classmates
At the start of the action research project, research consent forms were received from all learners. Students were informed that the content of their data would not influence their class grade, and that anonymity would be ensured. In the first week English lesson, I added the prompt from Murphey et al. (2014) to learner profile

sheets: *Please write about a group of classmates with whom you could learn English well. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?* These profile sheets were collected, and the specific ideals coded using the qualitative data management software NVivo in the week before the following lesson.

Cycle 2: *Reintroducing ideals*
In an attempt at encouraging learners to interact with different peers, from the second week they were randomly allocated to pairs each lesson. A record of these configurations was kept in order to facilitate later exploration of different participant perspectives. I also introduced students to a *learner journal*. I anticipated that introspective journals could afford an illuminating yet efficient way of dynamically collecting data. I asked students to write an email journal entry to me directly after each lesson reflecting on their experiences. I predicted that the digital form would allow a more rapid input of data to NVivo, which in turn would facilitate a deeper, more complex and ongoing analysis. The prompt for the journal was simply: *Please write about your experiences in lessons. However, do not merely list the activities we did in the lesson. Try to write your perceptions and reflections about your actions and those of other class members doing the various activities.*

Learners were given the choice of writing in Japanese or English. Students elected to write in English in the main. Based on my understandings of the data collected the previous week, I also showed students descriptors of ideals for action and examples written by their peers (*Ideal classmates activity*). I next asked learners to individually select one ideal of which to remain cognizant in the lesson, copy it into their journal (an open email in their cell-phone), and show it to their partner. At the end of each session, I reminded participants to reflect on experiences in their journals and to send me their email composition by the end of the day. This process was repeated each lesson.

Cycle 3: Reflecting back
In addition to weekly reflections, I was eager to gain learners' opinions at the end of the semester (week 15). In part, I wanted to compare my understandings emergent from the ongoing analysis during the action research with students' own perceptions of acting on the ideals across the semester. As one section of a *semester reflection* form, I asked them to write freely about the *ideal classmates activity*. They then compared ideas in groups of four, announcing a summary to the class group. The prompt for this reflection was: *At the start of the semester, I asked you to write about ways in which you would like your classmates to act to help each other learn better and more enjoyably. I then asked you to try to act in some of these ways during lessons. Please reflect back and write your impressions of doing these things this semester.*

3.3. Analysis

Analysis progressed through a number of recursive stages (see Table 1).

Table 1 Description of stages of analysis

Stage	Process
1	"Cases" created for each participant in NVivo. Straightforward thematic content analysis of ideas for the actions of ideal classmates proposed by participants with similar ideals grouped together. Ideals text also coded to each case.
2	Ongoing as participant email journals collected each week. Entries coded to each case and to a "week" code to enable examination of dynamics. Entries scanned to code to references to ideals. Macro-analysis conducted by looking for repetitions and regularities across entries, considering participants may emphasize ideas of significance for themselves (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). New codes created as a phenomenon in participant entry not represented by existing codes. Use of overlapping codes to facilitate exploration of patterns of connection between themes at a later date (Bazeley, 2013). Initial attempts at hierarchical arrangement of codes into related groups and based on research questions. Reflective analysis memos written to clarify researcher understanding of codes, speculate about relationships between codes and patterns of change over the course of the study.
3	After completion of data-collection. Memos re-examined to remind myself of dynamic understandings over course of change-action. Codes and data examined again in full, moving "down" to lower levels to microcode specific qualities of codes, and "up" to higher levels to make meta-codes by rearranging hierarchical code-trees.
4	Connections, relationships, and discrepancies between codes examined based on speculations from memos using the matrix coding function of NVivo. Simple counts of coded references facilitated exploration of potentially significant connections, qualities apparent in connected coded texts facilitated interpretation of relationships. Graphs, multiple threading (Davis & Sumara, 2006 – see the section on results), within-case and across-case comparison using matrix coding to explore dynamics of participant choices and reflections on ideals. Use of weekly seating charts to explore different perspectives on shared events.
5	Theoretical comparison with properties of complex systems: "Properties and dimensions that are derived from the 'outside' (...) give us ideas of what to look for in the data, making us sensitive to things we might have overlooked before" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 76). Theoretical comparison employed in order to consider more general processes evident in the analysis. Coded data collected into "sets" in NVivo based upon perceived usefulness of description with properties from complex systems.

4. Results and interpretations

This section addresses results related to each of the research questions. Learner journal is marked with the week of reflection, as in LJ: 4, while semester reflections are indicated as SR. All student names are pseudonyms. All student text is quoted uncorrected.

4.1. Initial student ideals for the actions of classmates

Seven overarching themes emerged at the start of the semester regarding students' ideas for the ideal actions of their peers. Table 2 presents the descriptors as well as examples of ideas for action written by participants.

Table 2 *Students' ideals for the actions of their peers* (start of semester)

Ideal classmates	Student examples	Number of discrete references
Act positively.	Talk actively; try earnestly in activities; don't be afraid of mistakes; greet each other.	30
Know each other.	Talk about everyday life, interests; say real opinions; know names.	18
Show enjoyment.	Smile; be friendly; be cheerful; nod agreement.	15
Help each other understand.	Teach each other; speak clearly; speak loudly enough.	13
Be kind.	Respect other's ideas; don't laugh at mistakes.	8
Don't speak Japanese.	Be the leader of speaking only English.	4
Praise each other.	Praise other classmates each other actions.	1

Students had gone to the trouble of expressing their ideas about the actions of ideal classmates. I wanted, therefore, to represent as many of their ideas as possible. As Table 2 displays, this endeavor meant that some of the descriptors were written about by more students than others. By far the most commonly noted ideal related to "acting positively". Hinting at students' hopes as they entered the new educational context for the development of a sense of relatedness with classmates, around 40% also expressed that, ideally, peers would try to "know each other". Connected with such a desire for a positive, supportive learning environment, a significant number of participants remarked upon ideals that peers would "show enjoyment", "help each other understand", and "be kind".

Some executive decisions as to what to include were also necessary: For example, I considered including the ideal "don't speak Japanese" (noted by only four students) as part of "act positively". Nevertheless, while the former focused on proactively using English, I understood the latter as a more general ideal of active engagement in activities (whatever the language). Additionally, only one student noted an ideal that peers would "praise each other". In light of the recent move towards applying ideas from positive psychology in language learning (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016), I decided that this ideal would make a valuable addition for students to try out in the classroom. What further motivated me in this determination was the wording crafted by the student: While praise of the *person* can be detrimental, praise of *actions* can foster positive affect and motivation (Graham & Taylor, 2014).

The vast majority of ideas that students expressed for the ideal actions of classmates were also represented in Murphey et al. (2014). These similarities relate to ideals that peers would act positively, try to know more about classmates, show enjoyment, be kind, and help each other understand during English lessons. Learners' ideals for such actions from their peers suggest their motivation to develop relatedness with those around them (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Similarly, the ideals imply participants' recognition of the importance of the class atmosphere for their engagement. Learners may be initially hesitant moving into a new learning environment. However, the realization that others around them are not so different and harbor no ill will can engender progressively more exploration of language use and the development of positive L2 self-concept (Yoshida, 2013). The ideals hint that participants wanted all in their class to work proactively to foster an environment in which they could feel less anxious about using language.

There are, however, some differences with Murphey et al,'s (2014) research. Although initially proposed by only a few students, in the current study participants proposed ideals to not speak Japanese and to praise each other. Conversely, emergent from Murphey et al.'s (2014) study were descriptors of ideal classmates relating to studying English together outside of class time, sharing study methods and English interests, finding near peer role models, and critically analyzing each other's strengths and weaknesses. One possible reason for these differences may lie in the participant samples: In Murphey et al,'s (2014) research, about half of the large number of participants were majoring in languages, intercultural studies and liberal arts. These students may have been more aware of and expectant of their peers' actions relating to particular *English* study skills. In terms of possible selves, they had more detailed images in this domain (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). In the current study, as the students were all science and technology majors, it appears that they had not taken such an extra step – it was enough to propose something like "not speaking Japanese".

4.2. Acting on the ideals of over time

In total, 458 of the email learner journals from students made some reference to the *ideal classmates activity* (for an average of 35 out of 48 learner journals per week). Figure 1 shows the ratio of students proposing each of the ideals in week 1 of the semester, as well as fluctuations in the percentage choosing to act on these over the semester.

In general, each of the ideals was selected by over 10 percent of students each lesson. Across the semester, learners chose to "act positively" the most; on average 20% of students selected this ideal each lesson. Such a result might have been expected, as the greatest number of students also initially proposed

this ideal. Interestingly though, the second-most subscribed initial ideal (i.e., "know each other") ranked fifth in selection by students in lessons. Conversely, although only four students had proposed "don't speak Japanese", this ranked fourth in uptake in lessons with an average of around 13% of learners choosing to act on this ideal each lesson. The least-selected ideal was "praise each other", originally proposed by only one student. This said, 33 students did choose to try to praise their classmates in some way.
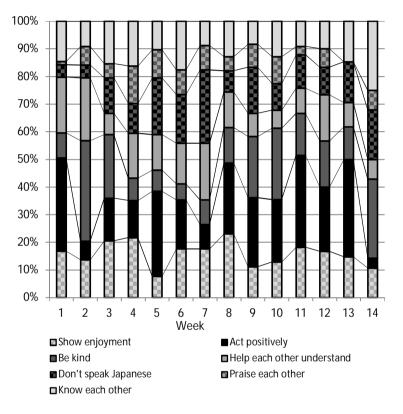

Figure 1 Percentage of students proposing and then selecting each ideal over the semester

While such a graph provides insights into the general uptake of each ideal, it also averages across participants. It does not illustrate sufficiently the individual patterns of student choice to act on the ideals of their classmates. Davis and Sumara (2006) have proposed a tool known as *multiple threading* as one way of representing the diverse contributions of individuals to an overall story. Figure 2 shows such a representation of the individual uptake of ideals by each student making up the two class groups over the course of the semester. The figure shows individual students across the horizontal axis, with weeks down the

vertical axis. The different shading represents students' selection of ideals to act on during a lesson. In this way, it is possible to zoom in on any one particular student and examine their choice of ideals over the course of the semester by looking down that student's individual column. At the same time, one can gain an overall sense of the degree to which participants proposed ideals initially and determined to act on certain ideals.
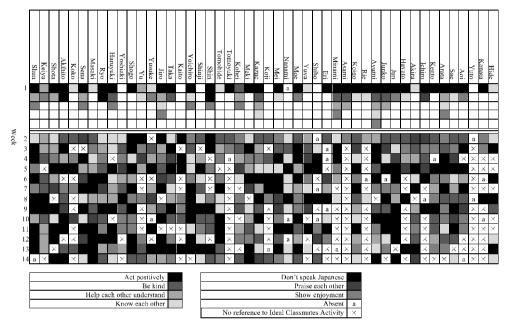

Figure 2 Multiple threading (Davis & Sumara, 2006) of student selection of ideals over the semester

Although perhaps difficult to take in at a glance, the multiple threading allows certain patterns to become evident. The vast majority of participants took up *the ideal classmates activity*, with each student trying on average to act on five different ideals (out of seven) over the semester. Only a few students chose to act on predominantly the same ideals (for example, Shun, Nanami, and Jun). Figure 2 also allows the insight that some students selected the same ideal for consecutive weeks. Finally, students who initially wrote ideals for the actions of their classmates elected to act on their own ideals approximately three times over the semester.

The multiple threading also appears to show that some students contributed less to this growing narrative. Unfortunately, the story is not so straightforward. Students making no reference to the *ideal classmates activity* did not submit journal entries: Yuto never; Tomoyuki only at the beginning of semester; Kanata, Rie and Asami only sporadically (and in fact, Rie did not take the final standardized test and went on to fail the course). At the start of each lesson when

I circulated and observed participants' selection of ideals, these students had also written something. However, their participation or lack thereof in the *ideal classmates activity* is not clear from the collected data.

Writing in the learner journals further hinted at ways in which the *ideal classmates activity* prompted students to reflect on their actions in the classroom connected with these ideals. The activity *raised participants' consciousness* of their agency and role in fostering a supportive, friendly class atmosphere. Learners often seemed to rationalize their choice of an ideal upon which to act for the lesson, as illustrated in the following extract (extracts are numbered in order to facilitate discussion in the following sub-section):

Extract 1:

Help others understand. I always talk quitely even when I speak Japanese. In addition to this, I can't speak English well. So when I don't speak English loudly, you can't hear and understand what I want to say. It is not good. That is the reason I chose this one. (...) I tried to speak loudly and clearly in today's class. I can almost do, but sometimes I can't. I thought I should keep trying (Kouhei, LJ: 4).

Student reflections also directly addressed the way in which the *ideal classmates activity* prompted action through having a raised consciousness:

Extract 2:

Don't speak Japanese. At first, we used Japanese in free time of the class. But then I remembered today's topic, so I suggested to use English in conversation. After that, the language we used is almost 100% English!! I think I could accomplish the topic (Taka, LJ: 3).

In terms of possible selves, one of the crucial initial ingredients for their motivating power is that the possible self exists in a particular life domain (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). It seemed that having an array of ideals specifically tailored to the domain of the L2 classroom, and indeed the very act of selecting an ideal, often helped participants to remain cognizant of taking action more facilitative of English communication in the classroom. In the extract, Taka began the activity using Japanese. However, recollecting his ideal for action in the lesson, it also appears that it provided him with a way of broaching the issue of language use with his partner: "I remembered today's topic, so I suggested to use English". The positive affect emergent from this change in action is noticeable in his assertion that subsequently he and his partner used "almost 100% English!!".

As also evident in the previous extract, one significant theme in participants' writing across the semester was the treatment of the ideals themselves as a *goal to be achieved* each lesson. This tendency was surprising, as my written

prompts and verbal cues did not mention goals but rather remaining cognizant of acting in the ways that other students would like whenever possible. Notwithstanding, particularly near the start of the semester, student reflections revolved around their perceptions of the degree of achievement of the ideals as goals that they set for themselves:

Extract 3:

I chose "Get to know classmates". That's because I want to know my classmates' character. I hope we will get on well. I think that our conversation become smooth if we get on well. Today, I could achieve this goal a little. I asked aggressively my partner some question and I could know her some hobbies. However, I couldn't tell her a lot about me. It's reflection point (Minami, LJ: 2).

As students thought back on their experiences over their first half-year at university in the *semester reflection* also, one of the primary recurring themes that emerged concerned the benefits of having a behavioral "goal" to work towards each lesson. The ways in which participants referred to these goals hinted at the importance of the ideals for their engagement in lessons, aligning with the past studies of Murphey et al. (2014) and Murphey and Iswanti (2014):

Extract 4:

Deciding goal each lesson is meaningful because without goal we 'only' take class (Taka, SR).

Extract 5:

This goals was good, because if we can have our direction, we can study efficiently. (Yoshiaki, SR).

The *ideal classmates activity* furthermore prompted students to remark on what I have previously termed a *revising self* (Sampson, 2016a) – projections of a proximal-self acting differently in the future classroom. Writing about a revising-self remained constant across the semester, with a spread of students contributing such ideas. Nevertheless, there were a handful of students who appeared to focus more frequently on revising their actions (seven or eight times over the semester). Interestingly, despite the speaking and listening integrated skills focus of the course, very few reflections touched upon a *listening* revising self. The majority featured images of *speaking* in the future classroom. Although reflections alluding to a revising self were quite prevalent, reference to following up on these images (for example, in a later lesson), was more infrequent. However, analysis uncovered that students who did act on their revising self were usually rewarded for their efforts, as exemplified by the following two extracts from the same participant:

Extract 6:

Today's aim is "Don't speak Japanese". But I couldn't speak in only English. I was frustrated that I couldn't tell the things I thought and wanted to tell. How do you say "*kimuchinabe*" in English? How do you say "*moyashi*" in English? When we discussed the things about English, I tried to speak in English at all. However, I couldn't. I spoke some Japanese to tell my group members the things which was difficult to tell in English. In conclusion, I was afraid I couldn't achieve today's aim. I'm going to try to achieve this aim again! (Mei, LJ: 6).

Extract 7:

Today's aim is "Don't speak Japanese". Last lesson, I set the same goal but I couldn't achieve it. So today, I was going to try it again! Next, I set another small goal which was "while for five minutes (self-introduction and conversation about topic), I never speak Japanese". If I can't give up speaking Japanese for all this class, at least not speaking Japanese for five minutes. (...) The topic is "You are planning to buy an item which you really want. What is it?" First, I told my partner that I want shoes because I forgot bringing some shoes from my home. Next, I told her that I want a bookshelf too. At first, she didn't seem to understand because my English pronunciation is bad. So I added that I have many books but I don't have places to put books in. Then, she seemed to understand and I became glad. I felt like saying the Japanese word "*hondana*", but I managed to use English. I couldn't speak only English in this class but I could speak only English for five minutes. Although this is a trivial thing, this is a valuable thing for me. I think this is very useful for me. I am poor at setting specific goals. So this helps me to set my goals (Mei, LJ: 7).

In the first extract, Mei clearly recognizes constraints on her capacity to stick to her ideal. Gaps in her vocabulary led to her feeling "frustrated" that she couldn't speak in only English. However, rather than languishing in a sense of helplessness, the *ideal classmates activity* prompted her to project a revising self who will "try to achieve this aim again!" A week later in the following lesson, Mei's writing reveals her agency in the learning process. In light of her experiences the previous week, Mei revises her understanding by specifically thinking about the same ideal as the previous week in a more concrete, realistic way. Even so, her interactions are not all plain sailing, with her partner not understanding at one point. However, Mei takes the agentic step of explaining her meaning in a different way. Although she hedges that the five minutes of her revised ideal is a "trivial thing", she "managed to use English", which became a "valuable thing" for her. Her frustration from the previous lesson gives way to feeling "glad" as she is able to experience success in helping her partner to understand and using all English. She becomes her revising self.

By examining participants' reflections over the semester, a pattern emerged that involved the *human focus* of their writing connected with the *ideal classmates activity*. More students started the semester thinking primarily

of their own actions. For instance, in the following extract, Ryo clearly focuses on his own identity and actions:

Extract 8:

Today's goal is showing enjoyment. I think I could achieve today's goal. When I practiced conversation (Exercise 4), I acted as real person. For example, I tried to express what the person probably think. I think I could enjoy acting. Enjoyment is very effective to learn English, so I want to enjoy next class, too (Ryo, LJ: 4).

From midway through the semester, participant references focusing on both their own and other actions surpassed in number those that concentrated on purely themselves (see Figure 3).
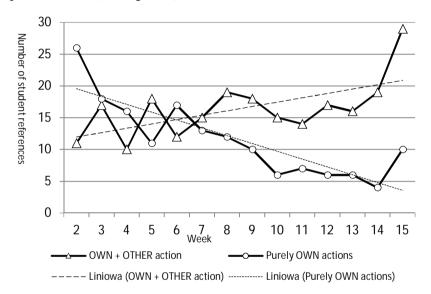

Figure 3 Focus on person connected with ideals for action

As evident in Figure 3, the writing of many students in the *semester reflection* (Week 15) also contained references to their own and other actions in relation to the *ideal classmates activity*. The dynamics of this theme over the semester indicate that students were thinking more about themselves and their actions in connection with the others around them in the class group, which in turn fostered more positive experience of lessons:

Extract 9:

I think the partner was conscious of the actions, so class was easy to spend (Sae, SR).

Extract 10:

I think my classmates tried to actually do the actions because I think we could be conscious of the actions each other (Maki, SR).

Extract 11:

I feel like my classmates tried to actually do the actions. I feel very happy when they do that (Kento, SR).

The increase in the focus of participants' writing about themselves and their peers hints at an implicit recognition of the role of *affordances* offered in the L2 classroom in acting on ideals. Students' actions and intentions for action were mediated by their perceptions of others in the class group with whom they were interacting. Kouhei's writing is representative of an overt realization by a good number of students of the affordances of their own actions and those of others:

Extract 12:

Show enjoyment. I think I could do this well in today's class because I showed I agreed with my pair by nod agreement. And also I was cheerful, I listen to my partner with smile and tried to show I was enjoy talking by asking about what my pair said. After I did like that, my partner more laughed and smiled too. So we could more enjoy talking naturally and talked about many topics. I think I can talk more naturally in English than before. So I want to keep trying this (Kouhei, LJ: 8).

Kouhei gives voice to the way in which the *ideal classmates activity* encouraged him to notice the affordances around him in the form of opportunities for his own actions and those of others. He begins with a focus on his own actions linked with his ideal to "show enjoyment". He senses that his own, positive actions encouraged his partner to "laugh and smile too", and comes to a realization about the relational nature of communication in the classroom: "So we could more enjoy talking naturally and talked about many topics". He reflects on his past experiences, and connects his current success with the ideal that he chose, "so I want to keep trying this".

4.3. Complexity in acting on the ideals

Analysis revealed the complexity of participants' actions based on the ideals of their classmates in three, interrelated areas: openness, co-adaptation, and non-linearity. This sub-section employs discussion and extracts from the previous sub-section to illustrate this complexity.

Complex systems are open, constantly exchanging energy with other systems within which they are nested (Cilliers, 1998). Analysis revealed a variety of

ways in which the actions of participants connected to the ideals was not bounded psychologically or temporally to the classroom on the day in question. Participants' experiences in the present classroom interacted with their projections of future action and self (Extracts 1, 6, 7, 8, 12). They moreover brought in ideas of themselves as language learners based on understandings of past experiences and beliefs about language learning in the classroom (Extracts 1, 3, 8, 12). Connections with participants' "transportable identities" (Extracts 6, 7) – personally-important identities carried into the classroom other than the situation-specific "language learner" (Zimmerman, 1998) – also influenced and were influenced by action in the present.

The analysis moreover draws attention to processes of co-adaptation via which system elements adapt dynamically to each other (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Intimating agency thinking – self-referential thoughts about the ability to commence and continue movement towards a hoped-for outcome (Snyder, 1994) – learners reflected on key aspects of the ideals (Extracts 1, 3, 12) and adapted the task itself by considering the ideals as "goals" (Extracts 3, 4, 5). The ways in which some students constructed revising-self images (Sampson, 2016a) of improving on their actions in the future classroom (Extracts 6, 7) also speaks to co-adaptation, as these students acted in the classroom, gained feedback, and made adaptations to their actions, altering the space of possibilities in the future classroom. Echoing Ushioda's (2015) recognition that learners both "shape and are shaped by context" (p. 48), classroom members were revealed as both agents and part of the context from the perspective of other class members. In congruence with my past research (Sampson, 2016a, 2016b), participant reflections uncovered that at times that the students were aware of these affordances and this co-construction, noting their own actions adapting those of others (Extracts 2, 12), as well as their actions being adapted by their perceptions of peers (Extracts 7, 9, 10, 11).

Finally, non-linearity dictates that an effect cannot be directly attributed to any specific cause, such as that input does not lead predictably to proportional output (Cilliers, 1998). The *ideal classmates activity* overtly drew on the socially-constructed nature of possible selves (Erikson, 2007; Markus, 2006) to provide a shared image of the actions of an ideal classmate. Past research into possible selves has shown the powerful impact of developing a shared understanding and a sense of "this is what is possible for people like us" (Oyserman, 2015; Sampson, 2012, 2016a). However, control of the *ideal classmates activity* was decentralized (Davis & Sumara, 2006). The ideals from which participants selected each lesson emerged from the class groups, and as a teacher I made a decision to reintroduce these ideals to the classes in question. Yet, due also to the openness of the classroom system, learners' actions were not purely responses

to stimuli but non-linear, emergent outcomes of the interaction between their built-up experiences and sense-making of the dynamic classroom context. Non-linearity is also clearly evident in the choices that students made about acting on ideals in lessons. While many students chose to write reflections on their efforts to act on the ideals, others did not; despite the proposition of "don't speak Japanese" and "praise each other" by very few students, there was exponential uptake of these ideals by other students (Table 2, Figures 1 and 2). Furthermore, agency connected to the *ideal classmates activity* was interpreted and negotiated in interaction with others. Good examples are Taka (Extract 2) making use of the ideals to broach the intention to use more English with his partner as well as Mei's downward revision (a "trivial thing") connected to the same ideal leading to a disproportionate, "valuable" outcome in another context of action (Extracts 6, 7).

5. Conclusion

The present study employed mostly qualitative means to explore an action research intervention. Change-action attempted to support students in their transition to a new EFL classroom group. The study uncovered that participants held a range of ideas about the ideal actions of others sharing the same learning space, with the majority electing to act on these ideals over the semester after they were fed back to the classes.

One notable difference with past studies into ideal L2 classmates concerns the idea of "reciprocal idealizing". Amongst the participants in the current research, there was no explicit mention of imagining oneself as acting to fulfill the *ideals* of others. The lack of any specific mention of reciprocal idealizing in the current study may be a function of the difference in student majors between this and the work of Murphey et al. (2014) and Murphey and Iswanti (2014), or indeed the disparity in sample sizes. Another potential reason could be related to the contrasting research approaches and terminology used. Although I have used the term *ideal classmates activity* in the present article, I never used the word "ideal" in explanations to students. Rather, as previously noted, I told students that the descriptors were "the actions that their classmates would like them to do". Furthermore, regarding data collection, participants wrote freely in their journals about their experiences over the semester. In comparison, the studies of Murphey and associates explicitly reminded students at the end of a semester that the descriptors were *ideals* in the closed-ended section of the survey, before asking participants to write freely in an open-ended section. These differences make it problematic to draw any definite conclusions regarding reciprocal idealizing based on the findings of the present study.

Nevertheless, in alignment with Murphey and associates' work, the current findings do suggest the potential for positive outcomes from inquiring about

students' ideas of the ideal actions of classmates. The *ideal classmates activity* raised participants' consciousness of their own role in moving towards a shared class atmosphere that would be more conducive to communicative language learning and provided an awareness that other students wanted the same. The study indicates that encouraging students to act on the ideals of peers can prompt thinking about what makes a positive class atmosphere, as well as provide them with a more reassuring context for using language in the classroom. The study also reminds us, however, that learners will interpret and act on classroom interventions in their own, social psychodynamic and complex fashion.

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