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

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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.

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 have to admit students with low proficiency in English, such as those at the A1 level of Common European Framework of References (CEFR), because of various admission requirements. Several practices for such low English proficiency students in Japanese universities appear to be aimed at imparting linguistic knowledge first rather than improving communicative abilities (Nakamura, 2005). However, given the present situation of Japanese education, it seems that many Japanese learners lack any experience of communicative practices in English classes as well as that of using English outside of the classroom (Author, 2016), particularly in regard to expressing themselves in English at the CEFR A1 level. Many people at that level are assumed to have difficulties engaging in communicative tasks in English because of their lack of experience coupled with anxiety about their proficiency. Thus, this study introduced a performance task, namely, making and presenting a digital portfolio involving various topics related to textbook material, for the students to mediate themselves to communicate in English and enhance their engagement in the task. The task was conducted in a university English class for first-year students using the computer assisted language learning (CALL) system. The study investigated how the students’ language learner engagement was enhanced in completing the task by means of a questionnaire with open-ended questions and by applying the phenomenological research perspective. Finally, pedagogical and research implications are discussed.
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 first language (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 (Lantolf, 2000), claims that language, that is, interaction, is significantly connected to thought, that is, cognition. In other words, language is the principal semiotic tool for mediating our thoughts, on both the social and the individual plane. Hence, depriving second language (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, p. 161) 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.” Grenfell and Harris (1999, p. 43) claim that such a learning experience is “problematic” and developing a linguistic competence is “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 (Liu & Jackon, 2008; Tan & Phairot, 2018; Yasuda & Nabei, 2018). Thus, they need to “mediate” or “control” themselves linguistically and contextually between the L1 and L2 worlds by activating both languages to learn and communicate in L2.

Theoretical Features of Language Learner Engagement

“Engagement” can be defined in simple terms as follows: Learners’ “actions” are driven by something or someone (Mercer, 2019). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) explain this action as “active participation and involvement in certain behaviors,” including external (observable) and internal (cognitive and emotional) engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020, p. 2, emphasis in the original). This engagement is distinguished from language learner motivation; that is, “Motivation is about intent, whereas engagement is about action” (Mercer, 2019, p. 645). In addition, Oga-Baldwin (2019, p. 3) claims that engagement should differ from motivation or “intended effort.” That is, engagement refers to learners’ exact actions, which emerge from their emotions or thoughts, even if the intended effort does not always lead to the intended goal. This distinction has been expressed as: “Motivation is will and intention, [and] wanting and wishing, [while] engagement is the moment when word turns to deed.”

However, without intent, there is no action; that is, engagement and motivation are interrelated or include common factors (Mercer, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Thus, the antecedent to engagement must be the same as that for 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). Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) elaborated this discussion for practitioners, encouraging them to consider the following four aspects for constructing and facilitating language learner engagement: (1) the learner’s mindset as the learner’s internal (intrapersonal) facet, including their sense of self or competence; (2) the rapport between teacher and learner that enhances learner autonomy; (3) consciously elevating classroom dynamism and culture for learners to establish good relationships (interpersonal facet); and (4) the development of pedagogical tasks for learners’ sustainable engagement. Furthermore, Noels et al. (2019, p. 100) claim that language learner engagement involves interacting with the learner’s self, which includes competence, autonomy, and relatedness as psychological needs or satisfaction, as well as intrinsic, extrinsic (integrated, identified, introjected, and external), and amotivation as orientations, to use SDT terminology.

Task Design Conducive to Language Learner Engagement

Tasks for learning a target language have included authentic or nearly real-world aspects encountered by
learners, even in pedagogical situations, so that they can engage in tasks in captivating and positive ways (Ellis, 2017; Norris et al., 1998; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Svalberg, 2018). For learners, the task’s learning content and language materials from the teacher are also authentic because the learning itself aligns with what is “real” for them (Met, 1998). However, similar task engagement must exist both inside and outside the classroom (Ellis, 2017; Nunan, 1989; Svalberg, 2018). Practitioners have been faced with the challenge of including both authenticity (practice for real-world survival) and pedagogy for language acquisition (psycholinguistic aspects in second language acquisition theory) in tasks (Nunan, 1989).

Previous studies suggested that aspects of task design other than authenticity in topics and content should affect L2 learners’ engagement. For example, the study of willingness to present in English among Thai university students showed that presentation topic familiarity and the preparation time reflected the students’ willingness to present (Sridhanyarat et al., 2022). Some studies also claimed that the cognitive load of a task would correlate to the degree of task completion because of their growing anxiety (Chen & Chang, 2009; Donate, 2018).

With respect to language engagement during task performance, discussing who designs the task is important (Lambert, 2017). Comparing six empirical studies published in volumes 2 and 6 of Language Teaching Research, Lambert (2017) writes in an editorial that the proportion of a learner’s involvement in task design, topic, context, details, and language affects learner engagement in L2 use (Audrey, 2017; Butler, 2017; Kormos & Préfontaine, 2017; Lambert et al., 2017; Phung, 2017; Qiu & Lo, 2017). These include student-determined tasks, topics, content, or materials (Lambert, 2017). This argument concludes that if teachers trust students’ task design, they should supervise their students to establish learners’ L2 selves as antecedents of language learner engagement as well as determine how they selfmediate linguistically and contextually.

Method

The Pedagogical Hypothesis and Research Question

Previous studies discussed in the last section led to the hypothesis that pedagogical tasks for English learning may influence learners’ mediation to communicate in English and enhance their engagement in learning it. 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 (Liu & Jackon, 2008; Tan & Phairot, 2018; 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 English communication through a language course if their learning experience includes a performance task that involves mediating themselves linguistically and contextually?

In this study, conducted as action research, the performance task included both “performance” (in the narrow sense) and “product” (work) (Tanaka et al., 2011).

Students

The participants in this study were first-year students at a Japanese public university located about 100 km 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 their English proficiency, from CEFR A1 to B1. A total of 26 first-year students were included in this study whose English level was CEFR A1; they belonged to their department’s lowest English proficiency group. The class in this study consisted of the 26 first-year students and repeaters who had failed in the class in the previous academic years.

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 presenta-
tion slides to introduce themselves with regard to the topics determined by the teacher (the present author), all of which were related to the unit’s themes (see Appendix 1), aimed at developing 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” because they represented each student’s learning outcome in that the series of slides introduced each student’s personality and preferences to express themselves by using language materials introduced in each unit of the textbook. The students made a presentation based on the portfolio, called a portfolio session, twice a semester. Portfolio sessions were 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 other students’ portfolios. They took turns so that both halves of the class had the opportunity to present their portfolios. The entire session was recorded with an integrated circuit 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 by using a rubric on the basis of three aspects of content (alignment with the topic and how interesting the idea was), visuals (design and appeal), and English (appropriateness), considering the two aspects of 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 content. It was reasonable that the task should be semi teacher-generated, as the teacher let students decide the content of the portfolio (Lambert, 2017).

Three international exchange study program students (two from Denmark and one from England) participated in the third session of the second semester, as 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 as the students did.

The present study adapted a Japanese-language questionnaire with three-point Likert scale questions with answer choices “Yes,” “Partially Yes,” and “No,” as well as open-ended questions to clarify the reason for the answer to each Likert-type question and investigate the students’ psychological state while participating in the task (see Appendix 2). 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. A total of 33 students agreed to answer the questionnaire in the first semester and 28 in the second. They provided their agreement after being informed that they would not be treated disadvantageously in class and that the research data would be saved ethically.

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 experiences of 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 study applied phenomenological research perspectives, which claim that the researcher, namely, 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” (Butler-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 (Author, 2007, 2018, 2020, 2022; Butler-Kisber, 2018; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 1990; Vagle, 2018). The anonymity and the clear explanation of the research established trustworthiness and encouraged “trust building” between the students and the teacher/researcher so that the students’ comments would be authentic and representative of the real 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 (Author, 2007, 2018, 2020, 2022; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 1990).

Analysis

The results of the three-point Likert scale questions were shown as frequency tables. The study also adopted
content analysis to evaluate the narrative data collected from the open-ended questions. The narrative data were entered into an Excel sheet depending on each question to compare the changes between the first and second set of responses (Author, 2007, 2018, 2020, 2022).

**Results and Discussion**

**Digital Portfolio as a Mediator for Communication**

Via the open-ended questions, the students revealed positive attitudes toward communicating in English through performance tasks. To the first question (Q1), “Do you think that you could express yourself in English by making a digital portfolio?” (Appendix 2), asked in the first semester, all students answered “Yes” or “Partially Yes” (Table 1).

| Table 1 |
| Answer to Q1 (1st semester) (N=33) |
| Frequency (N) Percentage (%) |
| Yes | 16 | 48.5 |
| Partially Yes | 17 | 51.5 |
| No | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 33 | 100 |

As listed below, some of the comments about the reason for the answer to the aforementioned question, which were written in Japanese and translated by the author into English (Question 2), showed that compiling and presenting portfolios caused them to reflect on themselves and understand each other more easily:

C1: I could talk with my classmates by using the slides (digital portfolio) and speaking English. Also, I could make a very unique portfolio by myself (Yes). C2: Making my portfolio was difficult for me because I had to find photos or illustrations to accompany the stories, and it was challenging to look up unknown words or structures in dictionaries to write explanations in English, but I enjoyed the sessions because I could express myself (Partially Yes).

C1, from the student who answered “Yes,” and C2, from the student who answered “Partially Yes,” among others, suggest that most 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 semesters.

In the second semester, responses to the first question were slightly different (Table 2).

| Table 2 |
| Answer to Q2 (2nd semester) (N=28) |
| Frequency (N) Percentage (%) |
| Yes | 16 | 57.1 |
| Partially Yes | 11 | 39.3 |
| No | 1 | 3.6 |
| Total | 28 | 100 |

The reasons for the answers were as follows:

C3: The topics were familiar to me, and it was easy to express myself. Everyone listened to me encouragingly (Yes).

C4: I didn’t have enough English ability to express myself, but I will study English harder (Partially Yes).
C5: I found myself lacking in English proficiency (No).

The students had experienced authentic communication with the international students during the semester. The result showed that the proportion of students who answered “Yes” increased, which indicates that they had become more confident in expressing themselves in English, as C3 showed. Subsequently, those who answered “Partially Yes” and “No” might have become aware of the limits to their English ability through authentic communication as revealed in C4 and C5. Nevertheless, the student who provided C4 had an intention to continue studying more, whereas the student providing C5 revealed dissatisfaction with themselves by answering “No.” This result implied that the experience of authentic communication with the international students would enhance confidence in communicating in English for most students, whereas the experience might lead to an increased awareness of limited English ability for others.

However, the response to the questions regarding whether the students could make themselves understood in English through the presentation of their portfolio was different. Regarding Question 3, “Do you think that you could make yourself understood by the audience when you present your portfolio?” (Appendix 2), asked in the first semester, most students thought that they could make themselves understood in English fully or partially (Table 3).

Table 3
Answer to Q3 (1st semester) (N=33)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17 48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially Yes</td>
<td>15 45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33 100</td>
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The students’ comments on the task were overall positive. In response to the aforementioned question at the end of the first semester, the students revealed the following thoughts about the task:

C6: I wrote clear and understandable English expressions and added many photos to my portfolio to make myself understood by my classmates (Yes).

C7: The sessions were good opportunities for me to improve my English. I especially feel I have improved my speaking ability (Partially Yes).

C6 expressed the student’s satisfaction with their portfolio and indicated that their portfolio helped them be understood by their classmates. C7 also indicated that the student might have developed a more positive attitude toward speaking in English than before, even though they felt themselves understood only partially.

In the second semester, more students answered, “Partially Yes” than “Yes,” and no student answered “No” (Table 4).

Table 4
Answer to Q3 (2nd semester) (N=28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10 35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially Yes</td>
<td>18 64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0 .0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28 100</td>
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</table>

The reason for the answer “Partially Yes” was mostly the lack of adequate English-speaking skills, according to the comments on the communicative task. That might be because the students might have struggled with responding to questions asked by the international students in the third session or with expressing more than what they were capable of in the second semester. However, some of them attempted to make themselves understood in English through their portfolio and their limited English ability:
C8: I enjoyed making my portfolio and listening to my classmates’ presentations. I enjoyed learning English very much (Yes). C9: I don’t think my portfolios were good but I’m sure now that I could make myself understood by the audience (Partially Yes). 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 (Partially Yes). C11: I felt it difficult to express myself because I couldn’t match my English level with my native language. Also, I was sometimes confused by unfamiliar words when I spoke, even if I prepared the sentences in my portfolio (Partially Yes).

C8 expressed the student’s satisfaction with their portfolio, similar to C6 earlier, and implies that the student would have been able to mediate themselves linguistically and contextually between the L1 and L2 world after undergoing the performance task (Svalberg, 2018). In contrast, C9, C10, and C11 suggest that the students had been struggling with the gap between their L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) worlds; that is, they attempted to apply L1 experiences to L2 (Grenfell & Harris, 1999), which might make them aware of themselves more objectively than in the first semester. C9 and C10 showed one student’s experience with personal achievement in the process of mediation while making and presenting their portfolio, although C9 depicts the student’s dissatisfaction with their performance in the session and C10 reveals one student’s anxiety about their English knowledge. In contrast, C11 revealed the student’s struggle with the gap between L1 and L2 strongly and how they might get lost between them. Such struggles during mediation should be the acquisition gateway; that is, a “sprout” of becoming an L2 user with multicompetence in L1, interlanguage, and L2 (Cook, 2008). They must go through the process of acquiring English for the first time if they do not have experience with second-level education.

The answers to Question 4, “Do you think that you could understand your classmates through their portfolio and presentation?” (Appendix 2) showed that about half of the students thought that they could fully understand their classmates through the task in both semesters (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5
Answer to Q4 (1st semester) (N=33)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially Yes</td>
<td>15 45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2 6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33 100</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 6
Answer to Q4 (2nd semester) (N=28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially Yes</td>
<td>14 50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0 .0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28 100</td>
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This result also showed that the other half could feel that some parts of their classmates’ presentations were unclear even with their digital portfolio as some of them might have struggled in both the semesters, as discussed above. However, the students’ comments about the performance task below suggest that their understanding of their classmates and the international students even partially might have given them a good experience because English was used as a common language in the class:

C12: 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 (Yes). C13: The students’ ideas and comments were interesting, and I found them different from each other. I think I learned a lot about them (Yes).
C12 suggests that students’ feelings of anxiety toward and incompetence in English would make them avoid communicating in English (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tan & Phairat, 2018; Yasuda & Nabei, 2018). Once students feel confident about communicating in English because of positive experiences in which they have made themselves understood in real-life situations, they are likely to be willing to communicate in English, even with low proficiency in the language. Subsequently, C13 suggests that the students noticed the differences among students, including among the international students, by expressing themselves via the digital portfolios in the second semester. This experience might influence their attitude toward intercultural friendship; in other words, they might realize that the reason for learning English is to facilitate communication with others, including non-Japanese speakers, to get to know each other well. This indicates that the task of using digital portfolios as a mediator could contribute to the “conscious raising of classroom dynamism and culture for learners to establish a good relationship (interpersonal facet),” which would enhance language learner engagement as discussed in the next section (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

The positive feeling of achievement or enjoyment while communicating in English could be defined as a different dimension from learning English in an anxious state, as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) discuss. The present study claims that the performance tasks for the whole academic year, including social interactions using digital portfolios, promoted mediation between task, language, and context engagement by encouraging students to self-reflect, enhancing their metacognitive awareness of themselves both in L1 and L2, as indicated by sociocultural theory (Berk & Winsler, 1995). It also claims that the students gradually realize the meaningfulness of the engagement, as the task satisfies Svalberg’s (2018) model of meaningfulness, revealing a positive attitude toward communicating in English through it; in contrast, mediation between L1 and L2 would be “problematic” and may continue to cause students to struggle (Grenfell & Harris, 1999).

Establishing L2 Learner Self 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 about the task showed slight changes in students’ self-awareness as English learners:

C14: Making the portfolio was an opportunity for me to reflect on myself. Listening to others’ presentations of their portfolios was an opportunity for me to learn about them. It was fun. C15: I think I could express myself very well by reflecting on and learning about myself through this activity. Besides, it was a good experience to write about many topics.

C14 and C15, stated in the first semester, indicate that the performance task made the students self-reflect and was a good way to encourage them to make friends with each other, as they saw each other only once a week in this class. In other words, students may start the process of establishing themselves as L2 learners by engaging in social interactions through the task; these interactions became intersubjective activities with others (Author, 2007). This “interpersonal facet” between the student’s self and others would be a significant factor in enhancing language learner engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

In addition, C16 below could be interpreted as expressing the student’s sense of fulfillment or accomplishment with regard to engagement in the task after finishing the two sessions in the first semester.

C15: I consider the experiences from the two sessions to be my good fortune. The activity attracted me very much in terms of the fact that many Japanese people would be poor at expressing themselves. The student might be one of the “many Japanese people” who have metacognitive awareness of themselves and realize that the task would enable them to overcome their problem objectively. This suggests that the student would establish a learners’ mindset as the learner’s internal (intrapersonal) facet, including a sense of self or competence, via the interactive task as their interpersonal facet (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

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

C17: It was sometimes hard but overall fun to make the portfolio. Besides, I felt myself being able to use
English expressions faster than before. C18: 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. C19: This class introduced “active learning” and helped me learn a lot because I could express myself clearly and learn about my classmates in English. C20: I could learn English enjoyably because it was very interesting to make and present my portfolio and listen to the others present theirs.

C17 implies that the task might make students notice their own improvements in L2 proficiency, which would be a key factor in establishing a sense of self and integrating the meaningfulness of learning English into the learners’ selves (Author, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This would, in turn, be conducive to language learner engagement and intrinsic motivation (Mercer, 2019; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). C18, C19, and C20 suggest that the students realized 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 or being members of a passive or “empty” audience, even with low proficiency (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Firth & Wager, 1997, 1998; Sfard, 1998). C18 and C19 also indicate that this performance task, as seen in John Dewey’s (1938) concept of “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. C20, which was a similar comment to C6 and C8 discussed in the last section, shows that students could enjoy learning English by engaging in a task, which might energize language learner engagement (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016; Mercer, 2019). The comments imply that the task would encourage the students to adjust their mindsets toward 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 for English accuracy but for conveying meaning appropriately. In addition, the entire process of the performance task requires the students to self-mediate through aspects such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness with others, which would enhance language learner engagement and facilitate the integration of L2 into the learner’s self in the SDT’s motivational model (Noels et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The study suggests that the students become self-aware English learners by engaging in the task, which would also probably lead to their willingness to communicate in English.

Issues on Task Design: Who Should Design Tasks?

The task was teacher-generated; the students were not allowed to select the task or choose the topics. The following comment reveals dissatisfaction with the topics the teacher offered (see Appendix 2):

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 an 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, 2019; Qin & Lo, 2017).

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 greater detail.

C22 and C23 reveal students’ dissatisfaction with the teacher’s instruction, although the teacher presented the topics in the course syllabus in advance and explained each topic in detail with examples. These feelings affect the establishment of the “rapport between teacher and learners to enhance learner autonomy,” which is one of the aspects in constructing and facilitating language learner engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). These comments from the students bring forth the question of a balance between learner- and teacher-generated task design to consider another aspect of enhancing language learner engagement: “the development of pedagogical tasks for learners’ sustainable engagement” (Lambert, 2017; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020)

Conclusion
The present research yielded several findings for the author as the students’ English teacher. First, the performance task of making and presenting a digital portfolio may enhance language learner engagement in communicating in English (Svalberg, 2018), although mediation between L1 and L2 might still be problematic and challenging for some students (Grenfell & Harris, 1999). In the English class, most students behaved as agents and legitimate participants by mediating themselves in the learning context, the performance task, and with regard to the learning materials, despite their low English-language proficiency; however, some revealed difficulty in mediating themselves in Japanese and English. Particularly, the experience of more authentic communication in English with the international students in the second semester made the students aware of their English proficiency more clearly because the students would reflect on themselves more deeply and enhance metacognitive awareness enough to recognize their English proficiency level (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Ellis, 2017; Norris et al., 1998; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Svalberg, 2018).

Such authentic communication could be effective for the students who felt self-efficacy in communication enhanced language learner engagement in the future; subsequently, it would lead the others to engage less in learning and using English if they believed the communications to have failed, which would deprive them of self-efficacy and in turn self-esteem (Jabbarifar, 2011; Mills, 2014). This suggests that the teacher should consider such aspects of the performance task and support the latter type of students as much as possible, such as by giving meaning-focused feedback for communication rather than form-focused one for accuracy in regular lessons, encouraging students with low self-efficacy to make use of digital technology to compensate for their lack of English knowledge and skills (Butler, 2021), or making them prepare and practice the tasks well before performing them, which is necessary for CEFR A1 level learners (Council of Europe, 2001; 2020). Furthermore, 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 with some support provided throughout the process in terms of linguistic aspects and task compression. Thus, practitioners should create a balance between learner- and teacher-generated content in task design, regardless of the educational situations or restrictions (Lambert, 2017).

Regarding the implications for further research on language learner engagement, practitioners as researchers should study the classroom in 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 were adopted. The present study was exactly ecologically situated in an English classroom using 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 a case of the “ecologies of engagement” that emerged from and went back to the antecedents of learner engagement (Mercer, 2019, p. 657). The more ecological and situated the research context for observing language learner engagement, the more individual and subjective the outcome under a particular research condition (Svalberg, 2018). The present study investigated students’ responses to open-ended questions to reveal the variety in attitudes toward the performance task among students and show different reactions to it. The study indicates that the phenomenological research method is suitable for investigating sensitive emotions in L2 language learners (Ibrahim, 2016; Pinel & Albert, 2019; Vagle, 2018); it should therefore be suitable for investigating L2 learners’ psychological states while learning a target language.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Appendix

Appendix 1: Topics of the “digital portfolio”
First semester
1. Listen to My Favorite Music / Let’s Watch My Favorite Movie
2. This is My ”Non-negotiable” Thing
3. How about this ”Dream” Job?
4. Someone with Great Abilities
Second semester
5. Can I Introduce My Best Friend?
6. The Wildest Place in My Hometown
7. ”I did it!”: An Achievement in My Life
8. I Want . . . near the Campus! (each student filled in the blank)

Appendix 2: Three-point Likert scale and open-ended questions (Japanese translated into English by the present author)
1. Do you think that you could express yourself in English by making a digital portfolio? – “Yes” / “Partially Yes” / “No”
2. Please write the reason for your answer to Question 1.
3. Do you think that you could make yourself understood by the audience when you present your portfolio? – “Yes” / “Partially Yes” / “No”
4. Do you think that you could understand your classmates through their portfolio and presentation? – “Yes” / “Partially Yes” / “No”

5. Please feel free to write your comments on making and presenting your digital portfolio.