Yes, We Are All Individual
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ABSTRACT
The following reflection outlines my experience of encouraging low-level students to participate more equally in extended English-only discussions. The students concerned were a group of relatively low-level students, whose motivation to participate was quite mixed. Throughout the semester a number of interventions were trialed with the aim of raising the students’ awareness of how much they were each contributing to the discussions. These interventions met with varying degrees of success. While they did raise the students’ awareness of how much each was contributing to the discussions, the also tended to act as a distraction to the discussion tasks proper. However, in the latter stages of the semester, the students’ participation improved noticeably. The most apparent reason for this increased level of participation seemed to stem from improvements in the students’ social relationships with each other. As such, the current reflection suggests that in-class activities that encourage social interaction may be useful in the facilitation of better lesson participation for some groups of students.

INTRODUCTION
Although Japanese students are all required to undertake six years of English language study at school, there is often significant variation in their second-language competence. The success of any student in the Second-Language-Acquisition (SLA) context is heavily dependent on their motivation. Successful SLA is dependent not only on the motivation to acquire the target language, but also on a willingness to identify with a different culture. From a behavioural-cognitive psychological perspective, learner motivation is divided into either integrative or intrinsic (derived from a genuine interest in the subject matter) versus instrumental or extrinsic (where the learning is a means to some other end outside of the subject matter itself). Research suggests that learners tend to be more effective and successful when their learning is intrinsically motivated, as the learning process is inherently rewarding. However, recent critiques suggest that these dichotomous explanatory constructs lack validity in that they separate the individual student from their social contexts, are under-explained, and are not in-and-of themselves causal. Recently, there has been an increased interest in the social context of motivation, particularly the influence of significant others and the student’s broader context of socialization. In particular, recent research has suggested that social practices constrain SLA (Dewaele, 2011; Fromm, 2005; Ushioda, 2008).

Reflection Context
The current paper is primarily concerned with a reflection on the participation of lower-level students in English Discussion Class (EDC) lessons. The context of one particular class presented an opportunity to reflect on the practical and theoretical implications of student backgrounds on participation in EDC lessons. This paper focuses in particular on the needs of a particularly challenging class of low English level EDC students. In particular this reflection focuses on: the challenges that arose from mixed degrees of participation within the class; the impact of several student self-reflection interventions; and a theoretical understanding of why motivation and participation can be problematic for some groups of students.

The impetus for this reflective paper came about from the very beginning of the semester,
as it was immediately obvious that some of the students were reluctant to participate in class generally, but more specifically to contribute during discussions. The challenges faced in this class seemed to stem from a particular mix of students with contrasting expectations and levels of commitment to the aims and objectives of the course. The most cooperative and competent student appeared to be misplaced, and should have been in a much higher-level class. Another student appeared to be relatively motivated to participate, but was frequently disorganized, had trouble relating to the other students and difficulty articulating himself. The remaining students roughly fitted the often used sports kid euphemism. The latter group of students initially had a great reluctance to participate in extended discussions, had issues with attendance and often excused themselves from class due to university sports’ club commitments.

At the conclusion of the first lesson, the two more competent students approached me and expressed their concern about the participation of their classmates. I suggested that as it was the first week of class, the other students may need a little time to adjust to a new set of classmates. However, the same two students approached me at the end of the second class with the same concern. At this point, it seemed reasonable to try and leverage the skills of the better students to encourage the others. I suggested to these two students that they could use the joining a discussion functions that they had learnt in the previous semester to ensure that they were not dominating the discussions, and to encourage their classmates to participate. While the two students endeavored to use this functional language during discussions, their efforts met with little success. When the two stronger students tried to encourage the others, they were typically met with a wall of silence, and after awkward extended pauses were effectively forced to re-enter the discussions by the non-participating students. It is important to make clear that from the outset there were no behaviour management issues with this class. None of the students were ever distracted or disruptive, nor did they speak Japanese during the lesson – except on relatively rare occasions where there was a debilitating breakdown in communication. Rather, the difficulty was a genuine reluctance, or lack of confidence to participate during discussions. As was my experience in the first semester, the students in this class tended to deploy the functional language taught relatively well in controlled practice activities. Thus, they understand the what, how and why of each lesson’s language content.

There were a number of outside-lesson issues that also indicated that some of the students lacked motivation to perform well in the EDC course. Almost all of the students had problems with attendance, and two had dropped out less than halfway into the semester. Several of the students had greater commitments with club or sporting activities. The class also tended to do quite poorly on the weekly quizzes, and many were often reading the textbook in the time between when they arrived in the classroom and the lesson commenced. Despite being reminded after each quiz, at the end of each lesson, and in the weekly online class comments of the importance of reading the homework materials carefully for both ideas and useful vocabulary, the students’ performance in these regards never really improved. At no point did any of them ask for clarification about each lessons’ homework or for any other help outside of the specific demands of lesson tasks.

1 The euphemism sports kid implies that the students concerned have not legitimately earned their place in the university – which is to say have not earned their place in the academic system through demonstrations of scholastic competence, but rather through sporting scholarship. Also implicit in this moniker is the expectation that these students will not be geared towards the kinds of academic skills and modes of manipulating culture that are normally predicated upon for successful participation in the higher education system (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984b).
During each of the lesson’s extended discussions the same two students who had approached me after the first lesson tended to make most of the contributions to the discussions, as well as pose the majority of the questions, although they never deliberately dominated the discussions. After two weeks of unbalanced participation from the students, it became clear that some intervention was needed to help even out participation during class. During the first extended discussion of Lesson Three, without interrupting the discussion I wrote the turn-taking question (TTQ) ‘what do you think, ____?’ on the board while the students were talking. The aim of doing this was to raise the students’ awareness of the need for everyone to participate in the discussion. This met with immediate success, with all of the students using the questions to switch speaker, ensuring that all of the students contributed at least something to the discussion. As immediately successful as this strategy was it quickly back-fired. The students who had not been contributing much to the discussions almost immediately started using the TTQ as form of hot-potato game: meaning that when asked the question, they tended to add a very glib idea or comment to the discussion, and then immediately use the TTQ to deflect the discussion away from themselves. These same students tended to do this for the remainder of the semester to varying degrees. In essence, rather than using the TTQ to facilitate the discussion, the students used it to avoid it. To try and extend on the notion of equal participation, the third lesson finished with a quick review and practice of the joining a discussion functional language.

In Lesson Four the students were given a self-reflection task to complete asking them to gauge each other’s level of participation. The students were asked to complete this at the end of the first discussion and then use it to monitor their own and the other students’ participation during the second discussion. At the end of Lesson Four, as a reflective feedback, the students were asked to discuss for five minutes whether each student was contributing equally to the discussions, and what they could do to facilitate this this.

During the following lessons, the students were given a number of self-guided tools to use during the discussions. These were then used at the end of each discussion to guide their group feedback. These included: monitoring their own performance, monitoring the performance of their discussion group-mates, as well as emergency question and idea cards. These were generally unsuccessful and interrupted the natural flow of the discussions further. The students either forgot to use the tools or adjusted their responses to reflect what they thought the teacher wanted to hear. For the most part, the students who were already participating well used the tools reasonably well and the others did not. I feel these interventions essentially reinforced the underlying problems. These observations were potentially made worse by reflection activities asking the students to reflect on their functional language use. It was interesting to note that the effectiveness of the participation interventions paralleled the effectiveness of the controlled practice activities used to present each lesson’s functional language. Although the students all tended to use each lesson’s functions and skills within the lesson concerned, they typically did not recycle them between each lesson, nor during the discussion tests. This was the case with all of the students in the class, suggesting that the students had not made much if any effort to revise between lessons. Similarly, while the participation tools highlighted the need for the students to join the discussions more equally, they did not significantly change the students’ behaviour.

By Lesson Seven, there was a noticeable turn-around in the students’ general participation. This change in the students’ motivation and participation seemed, at best, only indirectly related to the interventions trialed in the previous lessons. However, there was one key factor that had changed from the previous lessons: at the end of the lesson, rather than the usual spirited rush for the door, the students stayed on and chatted with one-another in Japanese. Concurrent with this
increased social activity, the students’ overall participation improved markedly, and none of the students were late for or absent from class from that point on. Perhaps surprisingly, all of the students attended the final lesson, although only one of them needed to do so in order to pass the course.

**DISCUSSION**

Key to the current reflection on student participation will be a discussion of motivation. Although perceptions and attitudes are key substantive components of participation, the relevance of either of these to classroom performance rests heavily on the motivation of students to express these and expose them to edification and negotiation within the lesson setting. Promoting motivation depends on understanding and establishing a close relationship between lesson aims and individual student and peer-related goals. However, it can be the case that teacher interpretations of student behaviour differs from students’ perceptions (Dewaele, 2011). My experience with this particular class suggests that student motivation can come from different sources for different groups of students. Understanding how student motivation is constructed is important in being able to facilitate motivation in particular students in class.

The majority of SLA research into motivation takes a positivist orientation, and is aimed at maximizing effectiveness by manipulating individual and classroom contextual variables. Ushioda (2008) suggests that promoting self-awareness and agency in the learning process is key to learners developing motivational skills. The view taken of motivation in the majority of teaching practice is that it exists in a unitary, stable form, and can be molded via external interventions to increase participation. However, such approaches often fail to take into account the underlying reasons behind variations in motivation, and how this impacts the effectiveness of particular interventions. Student motivations are not static, rather are a reflection of the students’ sociohistoric and learning contexts. Participation in-and-of-itself is the behavioural outcome of an interplay of students’ perceptions, attitude and motivation. The relative lack of success with the externally regulated tools which were trialed with the students indicated that such strategies only had comparably short-term benefits because they did not necessarily match with the students’ goals and expectations (Dewaele, 2011; Ushioda, 2008).

Bourdieu’s (e.g. 1984a) concept of *social capital* is gaining currency in SLA discussions of motivation, as this perspective utilizes students’ sociohistoric context as a means to understanding their linguistic competence and learning behaviour. Research suggests that students’ orientation to education, their behaviour and competence are over-determined and naturalized by their social class. Students enter the academic field and exploit their experiences according to how their background and scholastic and linguistic competence predispose them to participate, for the current purpose, in the university system (Allen, 2002; Bernstein, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991; Dewaele, 2011; Hara & Seiyama, 2005; Ishida & Slater, 2010; Miller, 2004; Slater, 2010).

To make better sense of what might motivate different EDC students it is important to understand the range and dimensional aspects of learning orientation, language use, opinion giving and group participation. Table 1 draws on the works of Bernstein (2003) Bourdieu (1984a, 1991) and Allen (2002), and shows the binary distinctions between working class and upper-middle class cultural practices for some of the dimensions of relevance to participation in EDC lessons. It is important to point out that the characteristics described in Table 1 represent binary extremes, and do not particularly define a given student at a particular point in time. Rather, depending on a student’s sociohistoric context, attitudes and behaviours along these
continuums are likely to be exhibited. Because these social orientations are acquired across the course of a lifetime, they are naturalized, and people are inclined to reproduce them. In other words, students are motivated by the way they understand the world, and are likely to focus on activities which they understand to be indices of success.

Table 1. Categorical Binary Distinctions of Social Class Participation

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<tr>
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<th>Working Class Culture</th>
<th>Upper-Middle Class Culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Group cohesion</td>
<td>Individual meritocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World View</strong></td>
<td>Reserved, conservative, practical, concrete, physical</td>
<td>Opinionated, cosmopolitan, liberal, intellectualized, abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Use</strong></td>
<td>Restricted, elliptical, direct</td>
<td>Open, freer, euphemistic, metaphorical</td>
</tr>
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When the distinction is made between a *sports kid* and a *good student*, a distinction is essentially being made between different social classes of people who exploit different forms of social capital to gain access to the education and labour market. The key point is that a student’s sociohistoric context enculturates them to engage socially in particular ways. In particular, the in-class behaviour of *sports kids* tends to reflect a working-class background, in that these students are: more likely to take an instrumental view of education; less likely to hold the kinds of views and opinions that are rewarded within the EDC lesson setting; less inclined to voice opinions which distinguish them from the group; and are more likely to prioritize activities within the university context which reward their talents and are congruent with their world views (for the current purpose, particularly sports’ club commitments). Conversely, *good students* are more likely to be enculturated with the kinds of upper-middle class skills and attitudes required in and rewarded by the tertiary academic system and EDC lessons: having a liberal view of their education; be open to alternative and abstract ideas; and being prepared to take the social risk of expressing and defending opinions that differentiate them from their peers. Thus, sociohistoric circumstance has a determinant effect on students’ ability to participate in academic life generally, meaning it is not coincidental that there are a larger proportion of *sports kids* assigned to lower-level classes. However, it is not just that these kinds of students are more likely to end up in lower-level classes that affect their participation, but also who their classmates are. Recall that there were some significant differences in the aptitudes and willingness to participate in earlier lessons. One cannot help but feel that the within-class salience of these differences contributed to the unbalanced participation. As a corollary to this, I also taught another low-level class, constituted entirely of sporting scholarship students. Although the linguistic and rhetorical competence of this class was not significantly better, this group of students generally participated much more enthusiastically and equally. There were two significant differences between these two classes. Firstly, the latter class consisted entirely of men who got on well together from the outset – some having been friends before the start of the semester. Secondly, there were not such great differences in the linguistic and rhetorical competences of the students in this class. In this class, it was much easier to facilitate communal interaction, and this facilitated participation.
Put in the context of the above discussion, the change in motivation of the initially less-motivated students focused on in this reflection begins to make more sense. In particular, their increase in participation probably reflected the establishment of group rapport, rather than an objective awareness of the scholastic need to participate, per se. Although the students’ participation improved significantly, their use of the functional language learned in class did not particularly, nor did their performance in the substantive weekly quizzes. In essence, it appears that these students did not put significantly more effort into their EDC studies outside of the classroom, but did participate better because they began to find the lessons more socially rewarding, having established a stronger group bond. The implication of this observation is that for lower-level classes, there should perhaps be more emphasis on activities within the lesson that foster group cohesion, rather than on functional language which tends to reinforce social distinction based on individuality (i.e. giving ones opinion, and justifying it). Communal participation may be facilitated through activities that focus on more concrete topics, and encourage the exchange of personal experiences, as activities of this kind may better reflect these students’ world views.

Recall again the distinctions outlined in Table 1, it is probably unreasonable to expect all students to be or become good students in the course of the EDC programme, as this would imply a reworking of the sum total of some students’ experience. However, a better understanding of different students’ orientations to their studies and what motivates them can be key to facilitating improvements in performance, while still achieving the broader aims and goals of the EDC programme. While the majority of the students in this class did not perform well from a functional standpoint, their fluency, willingness to engage with each other in English and their participation did improve substantially. As a testimony to this, in the final lesson all of the students were able to complete an unprepared 4-3-2 fluency monologue activity entirely in English. Although the students did not recycle much of the language they had learnt or ideas they had studied, their fluency was undeniably improved, and all who met the attendance requirements passed the course. I mentioned in the introduction section, that successful SLA relies not just on the acquisition of language proper, but also of a new culture. For some students, this is not only true of the culture of the second language, but also of the culture other students and of the university system. Within the constraints of the unified EDC programme, this means that some groups of students are faced with greater pressure to perform to teachers’ expectations - something that the students themselves are likely to be acutely aware of. However, this does not mean that students have what Seligman describes as “learned helplessness” (Ushioda, 2008, p. 27), rather that they are alienated from the learning process in the way it has been contextualized. With this in mind, it is understandable that some students appear to be harder to motivate than others.

The implication of the above discussion is that students enter into the Japanese university system through different channels, and this has a distinct impact on their motivations to participate in various aspects of their study time. However, this does not mean that particular students are unmotivated, per se. Students are motivated by different sets of classroom conditions, and motivation is contingent on a particular interaction of different sets of social skills. My experience has suggested that placing a particular emphasis on group cohesion may improve the motivation of students who may otherwise be alienated by the scholastic system more generally. It is important as a teacher to be aware of one’s own biases with regards to different groups of students, as well as one’s own relationship to scholastic culture. Different students bring different skills to the lesson setting, and these need to be both recognised and
balanced with the demands of the study programme. As such, it may be advantageous to approach some lower-level classes with the prospect of sacrificing the acquisition of some functional skills and content in order to foster group cohesion and participation. This can be done in particular by engaging the students in activities that promote social interaction more generally.

CONCLUSION
My experience with this particular class has reinforced my contextualized view of SLA. In particular, my experience has suggested that lesson activities which emphasize social interaction may better facilitate participation for students whose backgrounds have not as well prepared them for study within the university system. This reflection also suggests that it is important to introduce such strategies early in the semester so that they can facilitate other learning activities in EDC lessons. The ideas I have outlined above may also provide fertile ground for future research. This could examine the effectiveness of the intervention strategies I have suggested, and also how students’ perceptions of their own competence interact with their EDC experiences.

REFERENCES