

**Social Support for International Students in Foreign Language Classroom  
Communities of Practice**

Takuya Kojima  
Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
Italy

### Abstract

Drawing on communities of practice, this article considers social support for international students in Japanese as a foreign language classroom at an Australian university. Social support, which is a means of promoting well-being, is often set outside international students' day-to-day routines, especially outside classrooms in that academic support is a primary concern. Language education studies concerning student emotional experiences acknowledge that classrooms are venues for emotional turmoil and thus call for more attention on classrooms to better understand and support student learning. Yet, in-class social support has been under-discussed to date. This qualitative case study focused on four international students in an introductory Japanese course within a Japanese program community of practice and analyzed the data collected over a 13-week semester using a reflexive thematic analysis to write four vignettes. The vignettes highlight that the students felt stressed in their daily and academic lives, and built, gave, received, and benefited from social support in the classroom. The social support impacted not only their Japanese learning, but also their study for other subjects; that is, it enhanced their overall well-being as students. Exploring in-class social support using a community of practice perspective helped elucidate how educators can promote social support in foreign language classrooms. Further, it prompted us to reconsider what classrooms are for, and underlined the importance of paying attention to such support to enhance the well-being of international students who are likely to face challenges frequently.

*Keywords:* classroom, communities of practice, emotional experiences, foreign language, international students, social support, vignette

Social support has become as important as academic support for international students at Australian universities. This is because their day-to-day living is challenging. The students not only have to manage a heavy study workload delivered via unaccustomed teaching methods, but also contend with everyday life without family support, in a place where encounters with the unfamiliar are all-too-common (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Not all, but many of them face such challenges using English as their additional language, which is why language education studies concern them (Page & Chahboun, 2019). Further, international students are often under the pressure of hefty fees, restricting flexible academic paths. Therefore, they are likely to have emotional, cultural, and financial issues impacting their mental health and well-being (Blum et al., 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2008; Stallman & Scochet, 2009). Social support refers to connections and resources within a social network that improve mental health and promote well-being (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Shumaker & Hill, 1991). Providing effective social support is likely to enhance international student well-being and resultant academic performance.

Today, social support is often seen as an add-on that sits outside international students' day-to-day living routines. For instance, a cultural mentor program, social clubs, counseling services, and an international student welcome support desk at an airport are available in the case of the university where the author conducted this study. These types of social support expect international students to be proactive and utilize such opportunities and services voluntarily. Yet, doing so is becoming harder and harder for them due to "greater time pressures, a larger range of courses and accompanying time-tabling complexities, and the growth of casual and part-time jobs in the 24/7 economy" (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, p. 672). Thus, exploring alternative means of social support is needed. This article focuses on classrooms embedded in their day-to-day living routines, yet often assumed to primarily focus on academic support (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001).

This article aims to explore classrooms as spaces to facilitate social support for international students, drawing on a case of a Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) education classroom at an Australian university. JFL classrooms are on the focus because Japanese is both the target and the medium of learning; therefore, such social spaces may not immediately define power relationships based on the ability to use English as social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Razfar, 2005). The theoretical underpinning of this article is communities of practice (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015), setting the goal of learning as "community building" and seeing learning as "belonging, participating and communicating" (Sfard, 1998, p. 7). Despite the critique that classrooms are unlikely to have all the features of CoP (Haneda, 2006; Wenger, 1998), it is argued that it is possible for classrooms to become closer to CoP when CoP informs the educational practice (Nagao, 2018). The JFL course design this article examines is informed by the concepts of CoP (Thomson, 2017). Focusing on such CoP-like classrooms is best suited for consideration of in-class social support. However, such studies have been scarce to date.

In the following sections, studies concerning student well-being in the field of language education are overviewed, CoP is explained, and the literature drawing on CoP is reviewed to clarify the needs of the current study. Then, this article presents the methodology: the cases, data sources, and analysis method employed to achieve this study's aim. After describing the Japanese course as the background of the findings, four vignettes of focal participants are provided. The discussion considers the effect of in-class social support for the students, how the JFL classrooms come to offer social support and emotional experiences with social support

in the classrooms. The article concludes by discussing the limitations of this study and suggesting future studies.

### Literature Review

Learners' mental health and well-being have been one of the major concerns for studies on emotions, "conscious feelings that evoke reactions in individuals" such as enjoyment, happiness, hope, surprise, anger, fear, shame, or boredom (Ross, 2015, p. 12), in the field of language education. As often reported (López & Aguilar, 2013; Macintyre et al., 2009; Oxford, 1990), "intense emotional experiences ... direct interactions, affect learning and performance and influence personal growth" of students (Pekrun et al., 2007, p. 13). For instance, anxiety over examinations, evaluations, and grading (judgment) has been found to affect student performance negatively (Zheng, 2008). Such studies are often in the cognitive paradigm and isolate and detect variables as static features of individuals (for example gender, ethnicity, and cultural background) that might affect one's emotions and performance (Harzem, 2004; Ross, 2015). Thus, what matters has been what is inside each individual. Dörnyei (2009) argued that classrooms have been seen as "venues for a great deal of emotional turmoil, yet *affect has been an almost completely neglected topic*" (p. 219, emphasis added by the author). This suggests that paying greater attention to classrooms may help better understand emotional experiences and support language learners.

Since a social turn (Block, 2003), the field of language education has expanded its focus toward how environments affect learning. Studies in the field began examining social aspects of the language learner's emotions through more qualitative-oriented approaches (Garett & Young, 2009). In such studies, language learners are seen as "whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, [and] identities" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251). A sociocultural view understands that their language learning "is grounded in social interaction and conditioned by social, cultural and historical contexts" (Benson & Cocker, 2013, p. 1). From this viewpoint, the learning of such learners can be enhanced when an effective learning environment is designed.

The current study draws on CoP to discuss such a learning environment design. CoP is a social theory of learning that sheds light on relationships between learning and the learning environment. It is defined as "group[s] of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). There are three foundational elements of CoP: domain, a shared passion or concern; practice, regular interactions with each other in a certain way; and community, a social platform where members trust each other and feel a sense of belonging. When these three develop, a community as a CoP enables and enhances learning as participation. Learning as participation occurs as newcomers continuously build their relationships with the other members, concepts, and tools in a CoP. In doing so, they come to see themselves, and others come to see them, as competent, contributing, and indispensable members. With such mutually established membership, the members grow collective responsibility and engage with collective learning (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Studies have so far employed CoP to investigate, understand, and design effective communities for such collective learning. Yet, these studies caution us to explore classrooms carefully.

Studies drawing on CoP have indicated that facing challenges is more common than assumed for students in classrooms. For instance, Jang (2017) demonstrated how a classroom where

prescriptive correctness stands as an overt standard for judgment can be a stressful space, as it creates unequal power relationships among class members with different types of social status and positions. Specifically, Jang's study revealed the power of high English proficiency in a context where English is the primary language of communication for learning content. In her study, the hierarchical relationships between a native teacher and students and then English-native students and non-English-native students are established. Yet, she also illustrated that such relationships are still subject to negotiation and change. Jang argued that a certain level of language proficiency is usually expected for each type of class, which shapes the student experience in classrooms. Lantolf and Genung (2002) reported the case of a struggling student in a Chinese language classroom due to the unnegotiable power relationship between the class teacher with a particular learning belief and the student with an opposing belief. In short, classrooms are often considered as "site[s] of struggle" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36).

Such struggles may arise in the studies employing CoP because the classrooms in the studies are unlikely to function as CoP in its original sense. This is due to misalignments between classroom realities and CoP as a theoretical construct. While a full discussion on the misalignments is given on other occasions, the following are a few instances relevant to the current article. First, learning is at the center of attention in classrooms, while the practice is central in CoP (Wenger, 1998). Members in CoP participate to practice their knowledge and skills to satisfy a shared interest or solve a shared issue (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning occurs as an integral part of the practice. Second, membership makeups differ. CoP expects to have members with varying lengths of experience, from newcomers to members with sufficient experience and master practitioners. In contrast, classrooms usually have a teacher and students beginning to participate at the same time.

Despite the misalignments, adjusting foreign language (FL) classroom realities to CoP may lead to turning classrooms into CoP-like communities (Nagao, 2018; Thomson, 2017). Yet, learning in classrooms where CoP informs educational design is still underexplored. In particular, how CoP-like classrooms impact on students with a focus on classrooms as spaces for social support has not yet been thoroughly discussed.

### **Methodology**

The current study is part of a larger study conducted to theorize a special CoP for FL classrooms drawing on introductory JFL classrooms in a Japanese program CoP connecting all courses in the program and surrounding communities (Thomson & Mori, 2015). In the program, students can find various peers, purposes, and settings, which are often scarce in FL learning settings, for their learning to be interactional, motivational, and authentic. The classrooms in this study are considered as special CoP-like classrooms (Kojima, 2019).

This qualitative study focuses on four students' experiences, Claire, Susie, Roy, and Raymond, as the focal cases of international students undertaking a FL course at an Australian university. These names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the students. They were the only international students among 13 student-participants of the larger study and, thus, were chosen. This study had two tiers. First, it aims to explore the complexity and uniqueness of a particular entity in a real-life setting using multiple data sources. Second, it compares collective cases to achieve a well-rounded understanding of and insight into the interest of the study (Thomas, 2011).

The data came from observation notes, semi-structured interviews, and journals collected over a 13-week semester and was approved by the university ethics committee where the data was

collected. Each week, the author observed four seminars (explained later), from Week 4, when all potential participants in each class gave permission, to Week 13. From these four, the author focuses on two seminars: Claire and Susie attended the same seminar, and Roy and Raymond attended the same seminar. The observation notes contain the student seating, teacher instructions, activities, notable conversations among class members, and the author's afterthoughts. In three one-hour interviews, conducted in Week 7, 10 and 13, the student-participants reflected on and described their learning experiences, focusing on their participation, relationship with others, and identity in the course. Three 200-word journals, collected before each interview session, report first impressions of the course, experiences regarding the interaction test (explained later), and what helped or hindered their active participation.

A reflexive thematic analysis of this study aims to interpret, construct, develop, and tell context-situated stories through thoughtful, reflective, active, and prolonged immersion in data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It was guided by the purpose of this study while allowing for emergent themes, e.g. socialization. The analysis of individual cases identified how the participants increasingly received social support as the semester progressed. Meanwhile, the analysis found how such social support enhanced their learning experience. A cross-case analysis (Schwandt, 2001) at a later stage looked for commonalities and differences among the four cases to elucidate salient experiences of the four focal students.

This article presents findings as four vignettes; short scenarios of reflexive interpretive accounts illustrating complex research findings and their theoretical embedding narratively (Langer, 2016). The emotions of the researchers are often shared in vignettes. The author, who had been an international student at an Australian university in the past, could better present the emotions of Claire, Susie, Roy, and Raymond through vignettes.

### Research Context

The first-semester introductory Japanese course at an Australian university was designed for those with little learning experience of Japanese. The objectives were for students to become capable of talking about themselves and familiar topics, e.g., university life and daily routines, as well as writing in the three writing systems; namely, *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, and a small set of elementary *Kanji*. The course had five assessment tasks. Seminars had an oral assessment called an interaction test, which was worth 25% of the total mark. It involved pairs of students preparing outside class time and presenting a five- to seven-minute performance. They peer-evaluated each other in the form of voting for the top three pairs who received bonus points, together with the mark from their teacher. The rest were two dictation tests, a mid-term examination, and a final examination. More than 80% of attendance was required to take the final examination.

The course was expected to be challenging as is evident in the average failure rate of the course in previous years being approximately 15%, higher than the university average of 8%, despite years of high satisfaction rates and large numbers of positive feedbacks in student evaluations. The pace of the learning was considered approximately twice as fast as learning at secondary schools.

The course in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is primarily for first-year students majoring in arts. In reality, it consisted of students from all years (from first to near graduating) and all nine faculties (including fine art, business, engineering, and science). This was due to

the course being one of the general education or free elective subjects. Full-time students took up the Japanese course as one of four courses in the semester, whichever degree program they undertook. Nearly 400 students were enrolled in the course.

Every week, students attended two-hour lectures with about 200 students, one-hour tutorials with about 25 students, and then two-hour seminars with about 25 students. Lectures introduced new topics followed by short activities with neighboring students, tutorials asked students to engage with middle-length interactive activities, and seminars provided longer and more complex activities. All types of classes employed a social and interactive mode of learning as its underlying educational approach. Students were expected to prepare beforehand to participate in interactions using Japanese in classes.

In the seminars, the students engaged with varieties of interactive pair and group activities such as homework checks, forming short sentences, interviewing each other, reading dialogues aloud, and role-plays comprising almost 90% of class time; . Seminar teachers monitored and supported their students when needed after providing brief instructions about activities and quickly clarifying grammar points. One to a few support members, called *Senpais* (senior students), came from the university's advanced Japanese courses to facilitate the student interactive mode of learning with the seminar teachers and add variety to class interactions such as presenting a model role-play with the teacher (Thomson, 1998). The author in the focal seminars acted as one of the *Senpais* while conducting observations.

To facilitate pair and group interactions, seminar members arranged desks and seats so the students could form groups of four to six and face each other. The students often discussed issues with each other as the teacher and *Senpais* could not attend to all students at the same time. During the activities, including role-plays, students were encouraged to use not only the information in the textbook but also to include their own information. Such interactions aimed to allow students to show who they were and get to know each other. To know each other as people with names, they created a paper name card when the semester started. A few students brought them out when each class started and displayed it on a desk until the class ended.

## Findings

### Clair's Vignette

Claire was an Indonesian, second-year student majoring in marketing and finance. She came to Australia after graduating from a secondary school in Singapore. Initially, her pleasant visit to Japan just before the semester began and desire to befriend students from different faculties, as her sibling did, motivated Claire to take up the course as her general education subject. Another reason for taking the course was her intention to create a breathing space in her intensive and, more importantly, stressful university studies. Her marketing and finance courses focused on "*self-learning ... you sit down, look through the textbook, [and] do your homework*" (third interview). Students were expected to say correct answers, and she felt "*dumb*" when failing to do so (first interview). Their participation was not voluntary but only accounted for "*five percent of [their] mark*" (third interview). In such courses, Claire felt there was no room for "*self-expression*," which she thought was essential to knowing and befriending each other (second interview).

Unlike in the marketing and finance courses, Claire expressed herself in the "*lively*," "*open-minded*," "*amicable*," "*conducive*," "*cheerful*," "*light-hearted*," and "*enjoyable*" learning environment of her seminar (first interview, first journal). Claire emphasized that she was

*“never afraid to make mistakes or ask questions”* in the seminar where she would not be judged based on what she said (first journal). Her participation was voluntary and genuine in the seminar. Such an atmosphere emerged due to the interactive learning and assessment activities, which were consistent over the semester. While the regular interactive tasks built the firm foundation of her positive experience, the highlight was when Claire and her partner were peer-voted as the top pair in the interaction test. She explained they *“successfully pushed [themselves] out of comfort zones, developed [their] creative thinking and strengthened [their] friendship”* (second journal). After the test, she felt not only *“a surge of relief”* but also *“reward[ed]”* (second journal).

The Japanese course was indeed *“challenging”* for Claire (first interview). Yet, the social networks encouraged her to complete homework, attend classes, and participate fully in the activities. Claire explained that her motivation to complete homework partly came from *“peer-pressure”* (third interview). However, she also associated completing homework with enjoyably checking it with her classmates and thus used Japanese homework to reduce the stress she felt from the finance and marketing subjects.

Claire summarized what she experienced as *“cohesive learning,”* in which the students simultaneously *“socialized”* and learned Japanese from one another (third interview). She befriended her group members and was acquainted with many classmates from different faculties as she looked forward. To her, the seminar was a *“very supportive learning environment where [they could] collectively learn from everyone”* (third journal). She pleasantly completed the *“challenging”* course and continued onto the second-semester introductory course.

### **Susie’s Vignette**

Susie was a Chinese, first-year student majoring in psychological science. She moved to Australia when she joined the second-last year of an Australian high school. With an active and ‘outdoorsy’ personality, she enjoyed the culture of Sydney, for example going to beaches and hiking. However, she lived with a host-family who had specific dietary rules due to religious reasons. She often felt stressed as she could not eat some of her favorite Chinese cuisines at home.

Since she was young, Susie had longed to study Japanese due to her keen interest in *“charming”* and *“attractive”* Japanese pop-culture (JPC) such as Japanese animation (first interview). She could finally start studying Japanese at the university as Japanese courses were not offered at her high school. She looked forward to meeting classmates with similar interests, and planned to continue learning Japanese through to an advanced level so she could watch anime without subtitles, communicate fluently with other speakers of Japanese, and live in Japan

When her very first semester at the university commenced, Susie *“always th[ought] that others [were] doing better than [her]”* in all courses (second interview). She identified *“English [being] their first language”* as one of the primary reasons for feeling inferior (second interview). Yet, the Japanese course soon became the one she could enjoy. This was because frequent pair and group interactions focusing on tone, pitch, attentive feedback, and body language allowed her to feel like a Japanese speaker, which differed from her usual self. Further, such interactions helped her befriend classmates from different academic and cultural backgrounds but with shared interests in JPC. Susie said, she made *“close friends”* with a *“strong link [and] strong connection”* in the seminar (third interview).



Susie underwent further delightful experiences. She realized that the students, including herself, often laughed when they made mistakes. However, it was not “*playful*” but a “*friendly laugh*” (first interview). They often made similar mistakes and therefore laughed together to share and reduce the feeling of embarrassment and face the challenge of learning Japanese together. Moreover, the teachers quickly remembered student names, including hers, unlike the teachers in other courses, which pleasantly surprised her (first interview). Susie found the interaction test challenging and felt “*super nervous*” (second interview). Yet, she felt less nervous and remained focused as her classmates continued looking and smiling at her nicely during her performance.

In the seminar, many students were senior to her so Susie could learn not only Japanese but also “*how to survive*” at the university (first journal). As the semester progressed, managing the study workload of four courses became increasingly difficult. However, she could “*always complain [about her] work,*” “*share [her] problems,*” and receive both practical and affective support from her seminar classmates (third interview).

Despite all the positive experiences, Susie did not pass the course. She could not spend enough time studying for the final examination of Japanese due to the excessive workload of her other subjects. Nevertheless, she told the author how content she was about the entire experience in the Japanese course when we happened to come across each other on campus after the semester ended.

### Roy's Vignette

Roy was a Chinese (Cantonese speaker), third-year student majoring in computer engineering. Since his first year, he had struggled to manage the study for the engineering courses, which often included several projects, presentations, and written assignments within one semester. Further, the engineering courses were stressful, as the students often “*show[ed] off*” their skills and knowledge without considering “*other's feeling[s]*” (second interview). Roy took up the Japanese course as his general education subject. He was interested in music composition using Japanese-origin artificial voice, Japanese artisans, and traveling to Japan one day. His Japanese study was to equip himself with Japanese skills sufficient for daily basics and future travel. He came to the course with his friend, Raymond (whose vignette appears below), and they attended lectures and seminars together.

The first impression Roy had about the course was “*welcom[ing]*” (first interview). Despite there being students already ahead - like Raymond, who self-studied Japanese beforehand - Roy did not feel left behind as his classmates, teachers, and *Senpais* were kind, patient, and supportive. Yet, the fast-paced course was not easy for Roy, who started from the point expected by the course and who was still preoccupied with the heavy workload of other subjects. Over the interaction test period, he felt further stress due to his partner Raymond's seriousness, much higher proficiency level, and expectation. However, Roy coped with the test by negotiating to change the original script written by Raymond into a manageable and entertaining one. On the test day, he heard his classmates saying, “*Come on, Roy! It's your time!*” which he highly appreciated (second interview). He felt that his pair's successful interaction test performance, supported by his classmates and peer-voted as the top pair, opened up his “*potential*” and personality, unlike the “*really stressful*” “*on-your-own*” presentations in his engineering courses (second interview). Both his pair and his group members performed well. After the test, Roy, Raymond, and their group members had a celebration dinner together.

Roy used to judge courses by his performance compared to the other students, which gave him more psychological “*burdens*” and occasionally resulted in a sort of “*depression*” (third interview). However, he stopped doing this in the Japanese course after the interaction test. For him, the Japanese classes became “*relaxing*” and “*refreshing*,” which took away some of his “*burdens*” (third interview).

Feeling relaxed did not mean that Roy stopped doing his best in Japanese. He further increased his “*curiosity*” in his study of Japanese and started to attend the lecture twice (in the morning and afternoon) toward the end of the semester (third interview). He even surprised himself by not missing any Japanese classes, unlike the engineering classes, which he skipped as often as he could. While his overall grade was not high, he enjoyably completed the course.

### Raymond’s Vignette

Raymond was a Chinese, third-year student majoring in mechanical engineering. As a student near graduation with a sound understanding of university study, he did not express any concern regarding his study. However, he mentioned the gap between his way of spending leisure time, such as cooking at home with friends, and the typical Australian ways of spending time at cafés, beaches, mountains, and pubs. He called this his culture shock.

Raymond took up the Japanese course as a general education subject to fulfill his degree requirements. He was partly motivated by his interest in JPC but was also considering entering a master’s degree program in Japan, which he felt had a strong mechanical engineering industry, which pushed Raymond to study Japanese. He had already self-studied Japanese, learning Hiragana, Katakana, and some expressions, and he had even considered taking the intermediate Japanese course. However, Roy was not able to do the same, so Raymond chose the introductory course, which was rather for “*leisure [and] joy or [a] WAM-booster*” (first journal). WAM is weighted average mark.

In reality, Raymond occasionally experienced frustration and struggle, instead of “*joy*,” regardless of his high academic performance. During interactive activities, he often could not reach his full potential as the content was “*too easy*” for him, but not for the others (third interview). While preparing for the interaction test, he also expressed his dissatisfaction at having to make a “*performance reduction*” to accommodate Roy, despite it resulting in the best performance in their seminar (second journal).

Even under such circumstances, Raymond maintained high motivation. He found and effectively drew on opportunities to communicate with Senpais. He challenged himself in such opportunities and satisfied his curiosity by asking Senpais questions beyond the course content. During the interaction test, he observed his classmates supporting each other through clapping, making eye contact, and saying good luck. To him, it was “*a model of the society*” where everyone encouraged each other to feel “*less stressful*” (second interview). He started engaging in frequent interactions with his classmates about not only Japanese learning but also university studies, such as engineering, and personal interests. Raymond described the experience in the seminar as “*the simulation of real making friend[s]*” (third journal). It was a simulation because everyone was different from who they were outside the seminar when playing Japanese-speaking-selves. Yet, the friends they made were “*real*” (third journal).

Over the semester, Roy observed Raymond spending a greater amount of time on studying Japanese than his engineering subjects. Yet, Roy said, Raymond performed in the engineering courses better than previous semesters. Roy thought that Japanese learning brought Raymond

*“confidence”* and *“good motivation,”* which affected Raymond’s overall academic performance (third interview).

## Discussion

### Effect of In-Class Social Support

This article has illustrated that Claire, Susie, Roy, and Raymond gained social support in the seminars. As international students, they felt stressed in their academic and daily living as anticipated (Blum et al., 2012). The stress was certainly a burden for them, yet not to the extent that they needed to seek external support like counselling (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). International students like them may be quite common. The current study found that they coped with or even reduced such moderate stress and enhanced well-being, which appeared to affect their academic performance positively. Notably, the effect went beyond the seminars. Claire reduced her stress from her business course using Japanese homework, Susie learned *“how to survive”* at the university, Roy lifted the *“burdens”* of his engineering courses, and Raymond gained *“confidence”* and *“good motivation”* to do well in his engineering courses. This suggests how impactful social support just in one classroom can become. Classrooms are seen as venues primarily for academic support (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Social support is often provided outside classrooms, which international students are expected to access voluntarily. Social support could also be promoted and effective in JFL classrooms embedded in their day-to-day living.

### How Social Support Arises

The emergence of social support in the seminars was not coincidental. Using the educational devices informed by CoP, students, teachers, and Senpais were able to pursue “community building” and engage in learning as “belonging, participating and communicating” (Sfard, 1998, p. 7). The result of community building and *“cohesive learning”* was *“real”* relationships that promoted social support for one another. Socialization played a pivotal role in the seminars. Learning Japanese became not their exclusive focus, but an integral part of socializing with each other, unlike typical classrooms (Wenger, 1998). Knowing each other as people with names enhanced the community building process and sense of membership, as Susie noted. One entire seminar may not have become CoP as the students did not know all other members well, as Claire befriended her group members but only acquainted with the other classmates. Yet, the seminars were turning toward being CoP-like classrooms containing several sub-CoPs, which enabled social support to arise, develop, and function.

The membership makeup was as crucial as socialization to ensure social support in the seminars. For instance, Raymond had a head start, but his knowledge and skills were initially not recognized as the social and cultural capital in the seminar (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet, Raymond approached *Senpais*, who could recognize his resources as the capital. He first built relationships with *Senpais*, and then with his classmates. He could have been isolated and thus received little social support if there was only a teacher and students as exists in typical classrooms. Power relationships exist in classrooms, and they are unequal (Jang, 2017). Particular students are disadvantaged when a hierarchical relationship is established and maintained (Lantolf & Genung, 2002). Intriguingly, even students with more resources like Raymond could be disadvantaged. His experience alerts us to the importance of enriching membership makeups to avoid the stagnation of particular students in classrooms as students who prepare in advance for upcoming courses may not be rare.

The unique features of the Japanese course seemed to facilitate social support in the seminars. Notably, including students from all years and all faculties stimulated the students' curiosity with one another. Students with a wide variety of academic backgrounds may be common in any courses open as general education and free elective subjects. Yet, this appeared less common in the classes for only the students majoring in the same degree. Thus, for students to become aware of the feature, it is better brought to their attention unless they know it beforehand, like Claire. It was also notable that the focal students entered the Japanese course with expectations of it providing breathing space, opportunities to meet students with shared interests in JPC, and even a course for "*leisure*." Feeling "*light-hearted*" rather than stressed may have helped them get to know their classmates willingly. English proficiency was not at the forefront of the concern, as Susie's experience implies (Jang, 2017). However, this was not the concern for the others. The near-graduating students who had established strategies for coping with their university study, like Raymond, and the students with competent academic English, like Claire, who studied long enough in Singapore, may not have been very concerned about English.

### **Emotional Experiences in Classrooms with Social Support**

The focal students did not experience only "*joy*" in the seminars, even with social support. As Claire noted, the Japanese course was "*challenging*," even for Raymond, as discussed above. This was especially evident around the interaction test, as preparation was "*stressful*," students were "*nervous*" on the test day and felt "*a surge of relief*" after the test. Yet, mutual support may have been highlighted because the test was "*challenging*." Besides, they could feel "*rewarded*" after the test as Claire went beyond her "*comfort zone*" and Roy opened up his "*potential*" in learning Japanese. This suggests that emotions like anxiety, fear, shame, and frustration may not always negatively impact a student's growth; rather, such feelings may be crucial for student growth. Conversely, emotions like enjoyment and happiness alone may not necessarily result in student growth, as demonstrated by Raymond, who first sought "*leisure [and] joy*" but ended up voluntarily seeking challenges to learn more and more. This study has affirmed that emotional experiences impact student growth (Pekrun et al., 2007). More importantly, it suggests that satisfying study experiences may not be filled with only "*leisure [and] joy*" but ups and downs accompanied by a wide range of emotional experiences, which functions positively with social support.

Seeing such learning with a wide range of emotional experiences as positive makes us revisit the purpose of classrooms. Students were often expected to know correct answers before coming to classes, as Claire and Roy explained. In such classrooms, students spoke up to prove that they knew the answers, gain points toward the overall grade, and even "*show off*" their superiority to the other students. Those who failed to say the correct answers and were seen as "*dumb*" would have seldom tried again. It is understandable that students, like Roy, experience a sort of "*depression*" (López & Aguilar, 2013). Indeed, the Japanese course expected the students to prepare before each class. Yet, failing was nothing wrong. They instead welcomed making mistakes with a "*friendly laugh*," raised concerns without hesitation, and encouraged one another when facing challenging tasks. By one definition, classrooms exist for students to learn; that is, become able to do something they were previously unable to do. This process should include both failures arousing fear, shame and frustration and successes arousing enjoyment and happiness. If this is allowed, encouraged, and supported, students can come to classrooms to learn further and further, like Roy, who attended repeated lectures twice on the same day.

How the students in the seminars perceived their learning experiences was not necessarily determined by their academic grades. The introductory Japanese course set learning objectives that applied to all students. Roy and Susie missed some objectives. They could have felt dissatisfied and lost motivation midway. Yet, both reached the end of the course and departed the course full of pleasant experiences. This could be because the learning outcomes Roy and Susie uniquely achieved within the course duration were not necessarily fewer than other students, especially students like Raymond, who already knew the content covered in the course. It appeared normal that those course objectives did not capture all individual learning outcomes of nearly 400 students who stood at different start lines, underwent different pathways, and crossed different goal lines (Kramsch, 2006). Yet, their unique learning experiences were not dismissed but recognized and valued by not only themselves but also their classmates, teacher and Senpais since their successes were results of not an individual but a collective endeavor. Student learning experiences in such classrooms may turn into their personal growth in a wider and longer-term sense and might be more meaningful and empowering than just accumulating knowledge regarding Japanese especially for those studying it not as part of their major.

### **Conclusion**

This article posited that CoP-like JFL classrooms could function as spaces where international students built, provided, gained, and benefited from social support without voluntarily accessing services outside their day-to-day lives. The positive outcomes of in-class social support went beyond the walls of the classrooms. Further, considering social support in JFL classrooms in this article has highlighted the need to reevaluate the purpose of classrooms. This article has brought to light the significance of paying attention to and facilitating social support in university JFL classrooms.

However, studies reporting and examining similar attempts remain scarce. Further studies focusing on similar aspects of FL education practice and student learning would reveal more types of outcomes, as well as challenges, for effectively implementing CoP-informed educational practice to promote in-class social support. Notably, this study only focused on international students in one classroom; yet classrooms are always situated in a broader sociopolitical context (Holland & Lave, 2001). Future studies could consider relationships among experiences in multiple contexts and communities to achieve a more well-rounded understanding of international student experience. Further, student university lives extend beyond one semester, continuing over three or four years; thus, a longer-term perspective would be important for future studies.

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**Corresponding author:** Takuya Kojima

**Contact email:** [takuya.kojima@unive.it](mailto:takuya.kojima@unive.it)