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Research Article

The Dynamic Assembly of an Emotionality of Togetherness in L+ Group Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution of emotionality across small-group dynamics during an additional language (L+) classroom discussion at a Japanese university. Founded in analysis of a videorecording of Japanese students' interactions in their L+ English, it examines the ways in which emotional togetherness arises through the actions of four learners. By employing a unique multimodal (pictorial) transcription and a narrative interpretation, the study evocatively captures how verbal and embodied cues collaboratively facilitate the emotional resonance of the group. The authors identify three primary mechanisms underpinning this shared emotionality: (1) the shift from English to the students' native (i.e. Japanese) conversational style, marked by shorter, mutually-elaborative turns and increased *aizuchi* (backchanneling); (2) the instantiation of mutual transportable identities in the form of shared knowledge of popular culture, and; (3) the role of laughter in both expressing and confirming shared emotionality. While these factors appear to play a key role in the emergent outcome, the study clearly supports the need for more contextualized, dynamic research into the localized emergence and functions of group emotionality in additional language learning.

Keywords: emotional group dynamics, Japanese conversational style, laughter, multimodal representation, togetherness, transportable identities

INTRODUCTION

We may often think of social dynamics in terms of group formation and dissolution, shared behavioral activity towards task completion, the diverse roles we take on, or varied forms of leadership (Forsyth, 2018). However, affective neuroscience has confirmed that human action is constantly undergirded by emotions, with it being "literally neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion" (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 18). Human social life, then, is emotional life, not least the social arena of classroom learning. Indeed, research by Järvenoja and Järvelä (2013) in general education settings has found the ebb and flow of emotions to be "embedded in the collaborative learning context, in group members' reactions to each other and in the nuances of these reactions", and "cannot be assigned to any individual alone" (pp. 176-177).

This paper opens a contextualized window on the evolution of emotionality in a small group. It describes the findings of an interdisciplinary collaboration between a language teacher / educational psychologist and a sociolinguist / discourse analyst. The research focuses on video data collected during an additional language (L+) English discussion class taught by the first author at a Japanese university. Becoming aware of a significant episode of emotional togetherness (Carr & Walton, 2014; Crook, 2013) between four learners in one discussion group (Sampson, 2024a), the authors joined forces to take a fine-grained look at the dynamics of its emergence. In the article, we set forth a multimodal (pictorial) representation that reveals this emotionality to be highly contingent on group processes: the interpolation of aspects of students' native (i.e. Japanese) conversational style (Fujii, 2012; Machi, 2020, 2025; Mizutani, 1993), shared transportable identities (Zimmerman, 1998), and intricacies of laughter. The article thus unveils the ways in which a co-constructed group architecture of emotional togetherness is locally assembled through the embodied and verbal repertoires of interactants. Via the unique multimodal (pictorial) and narrative representation, it highlights the importance of attending to embodied, culturally-grounded, and socially co-constructed emotional dynamics in language classrooms. In so doing, the research

provides a compelling argument for the necessity to study (and interpret) language learning psychology in its local, social settings. The research findings moreover imply that fostering opportunities for learners to "be and become themselves" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 223) and express their own (mutual) identities might play a key role in deepening group cohesion and engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Agency in Social Context

While it is common to consider emotions as something 'within' the individual, cultural psychology reveals that "people in many cultures talk about emotions as more public, social, and relational" (Mesquita, 2022, p. 14). As Hareli and Parkinson (2008) summarize, "it is widely acknowledged that the most common cause of emotion is some kind of social event, that emotions are frequently communicated to other people, and that social processes more generally shape and are shaped by emotions" (p. 131). The particular qualities and functions of emotions emerge in phenomenologically distinct ways in specific social and cultural contexts and under certain circumstances within certain relationships (Mesquita, 2022; Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). Crucially for the current study, King and Morris (2022) describe the language classroom as "a social crucible" in which "affective factors play a particularly important role … partly because classroom exchanges tend to be public and partly because learners must negotiate them … transitioning from an L1 to an L2" (p. 313). Such a claim is supported by a variety of past research into the emotional experience of instructed L+ learning: For instance, a case study by Garrett and Young (2009) revealed a range of emotions as most frequently connected to evolving social relations; a key antecedent of language anxiety is the social comparisons learners make about their language performances (MacIntyre, 2017); recognition of supportive others in the social context of learning, collaboration and empathizing are key components of language enjoyment (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2024; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016) and gratitude (Sampson, 2024b); and learners feel more affectively engaged themselves when they notice

peers to be focused and willing to work purposefully on language activities (Baralt et al., 2016).

As King and Morris (2022) also remark, “an important consideration of emotional experiences in social interactions is that students…are not unwitting participants” but rather “have a significant amount of agentive control over their emotions and displays” (p. 317). Embedded in particular educational contexts, L+ students can elect to engage socially and emotionally (as well as cognitively) to differing degrees with the objects of learning and the others with whom they share the learning space. Learners’ displays (or not) of readiness to interact, to maintain ongoing interaction, and to respond to interlocutors will intertwine with their enjoyment, enthusiasm and anticipation towards further developing social affiliations with peers (Baralt et al., 2016). For instance, students may incorporate, repeat, or extend utterances, confirm understandings, or recast as a form of corrective feedback as they build affective cohesion in collaborative L+ pair work (Storch, 2002). Additionally, research by Bielak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2024) reveals that L+ learners proactively regulate not only their own emotions but also those of their interlocutors, for example, by deliberately taking a turn or asking a question when a peer stumbles on a discussion point.

Empirical work specifically foregrounding the social evolution of emotions in instructed L+ learning remains scarce. This, despite Denzin (1984) over forty years ago advocating for “returning emotion … to the world of interaction”, which might more adequately allow “emotion’s meanings, nuances, subtleties, innuendoes, distortions, and significations [to be] brought to life and thickly described within the lived experiences of ordinary people” (pp. 10-11). Emergent from teaching experiences, the first author has recently been exploring learners’ emotions in the context of peer communication (Sampson, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). For instance, Sampson (2022) targeted a critical emotional episode for a pair of students during a short conversation activity. Analysis of reflective journal writing highlighted experience of the episode (learner internal), with a video recording revealing the social context (learner external). Merging the psychological and social, the study showed students’ (understandings of)

emotional moves as afforded by and acting on those of their partner in their communicative interactions, allowing anxiety and hesitancy to give way to relief, relatedness and enjoyment over the course of a four-minute conversation. Emotions discursively emerged through nuances of the spoken language and embodied expression of these learners, situated within their evolving psychologies and relationships as they drew in and shared transportable identities (Zimmerman, 1998) connected with popular YouTube culture. In a book-length disquisition, Sampson (2023) accumulated a number of such case studies of L+ dyads or small groups. These cases likewise accentuate the ways in which learners' affective experiences of activities were heavily dependent on (their interpretations of) the actions of peers: displays of appreciation and support such as nodding repeatedly, smiling, and affirmatory vocal bursts; questioning and paraphrasing when a classmate seemed to be struggling—concurring with Baralt et al. (2016) and Bielak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2024); adjustments in posture to lean forward in interest or face an interlocutor; and chorused repetitions of information. Analysis also hinted that such behaviors were, however, invited through subtle displays and shared understandings within the context of the communicative interactions. Furthermore, the cases highlighted the personalized ways in which emotions were afforded, constrained, and understood within the ongoing life trajectories of these learners.

Shared Emotionality

While such empirical work has illuminated how the emotions of an individual are displayed within and impacted by interactions with peers, emotionality in a group is also very much a shared endeavor. For instance, Forsyth (2018) discusses emotional cohesion or group affective tone, in which "members' emotions and moods become synchronized, as if they had reached consensus on the feelings they should be experiencing" (p. 133). A similar concept is that of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993), a tendency to 'catch' another person's emotions in social interaction. In this theory, it is argued that humans converge emotionally due to automatic mimicry and

synchronization with the facial expressions, verbalizations and other embodied behaviors of those in the social environment. Hatfield et al. (2014) assert that "by attending to this stream of tiny moment-to-moment reactions, people are able to 'feel themselves into' the emotional lives of others" (p. 113). Another contributing process in the development of emotional contagion is said to be co-attention: People's emotions in groups tend to evolve in a similar fashion because they are attending to the same objects, activities, or events to which they ascribe their feelings (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017). When co-attending, a sense of psychological togetherness – a subjective feeling that others are treating one as if collaborating – coincides with heightened enjoyment and interest in shared group activity (Carr & Walton, 2014). In summarizing a range of research from psychology and education, Crook (2013) describes such togetherness that can emerge in groups:

> Human beings monitor the sociality of their own social engagement. They are drawn towards coordinating with others, in part, because of a general motive—uniquely human—to enter into shared states of experience.…The affect generated in satisfying this motive for sharing serves to stimulate and sustain joint activity. …What they are doing is orienting to the *togetherness* of their situation. (p. 38—emphasis added)

Although teachers may be quite familiar with a sense that groups or classes evolve their own communal "emotional climates" (Cahour, 2013), empirical work unearthing the shared development of emotion in L+ learning is somewhat sparse. Imai's (2010) study offers a landmark early contribution. This research homed in on three Japanese undergraduates as they interacted in Japanese to prepare for an EFL group presentation. Via a combination of video data, emotion logs, questionnaires, and stimulated recall of students' interpretations of the discussions, Imai describes how co-formed, emotional understandings emerged from verbal and embodied cues such as positive backchanneling and thumbs-up gestures. This shared emotionality had a direct impact on learning, prompting the group to decide upon a presentation critical of what had been intended by the class teacher. In light of his findings, Imai (2010)

concluded that rather than thinking of emotions as "intrapsychological workings simply filtering an individual's cognition", we might better understand "emotions as socially and discursively constructed acts of communication that mediate learning and development" (p. 288).

Moving to Multimodal Interpretations

As reviewed, a variety of studies are beginning to illuminate the intricate processes via which the actions of L+ interlocutors afford and constrain trajectories of affective experience (Baralt et al., 2016; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2024; Imai, 2010; Sampson, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). In social situations, emotions emerge and are communicated via (and thus act upon) interactions with others through the content and prosodic qualities of our overt verbalizations, as well as the way we exploit paralinguistic tools such as vocal bursts. Fluctuations in our affective stance are further conveyed via embodied action – our facial expressions, gaze, gestures, movements, and body posture (Shiota & Kalat, 2018). These coalescing modes of expression make public our feelings and intentions connected with the specific focus of an emotion, and in doing so impact the range of potential behaviors or emotional responses of the others with whom we share the social space (Keltner et al., 2019).

We would argue that with all this linguistic and extralinguistic communication, traditional transcription standards – which include contextual or observational information in textual form as a sidenote to the talk occurring – could do a more effective job of affording representation of emotions in social context. Indeed, Lemke (2013) argues that "our reliance on them [textual representations] is … a function of the older technologies of print, on which we are fortunately no longer dependent" (p. 92). As the first author (Sampson, 2024a) has recently proposed, multimodal portrayals offer potential to depict social emotionality in a more easily recognizable form. Such interpretations emphasize the visual representation of interactions as they unfold over a range of commingling communicative channels, or "multimodal gestalts" (Mondada, 2018, p. 86). These communicative modes or resources range from

spoken language to proximity, posture, gesture, head movements, gaze, print, and even the setting and objects available or utilized (Norris, 2004). We identify and zoom in on short (10–40 second) interactions recorded by video camera that hold some significance—that intimate potential to uncover deeper understandings of a phenomenon in which we are interested. Rather than a purely textual transcript, we fashion a graphical representation that illustrates the ways in which the variety and combination of modes impacts and forms the complexities of an interaction—in our case, considering the emergence and functions of the emotionality of learners. Methods of presenting multimodal transcripts vary, with a greater or lesser combination of textual transcript with timestamped freeze-frames or line-drawings of the embodied activity of the social actors. In Norris' (2004, 2020) approach, a segment of action is shown completely with photographs, with vocalizations superimposed in various font sizes and contours, being adjusted higher or lower in the frame to convey slight differences in timing, stress or intonation. As Mondada (2018) cautions regarding addition of spoken elements, a vital requirement of multimodal transcriptions is that "they must be able to represent the specific temporal trajectories of a diversity of multimodal details, including talk where this is relevant, but also silent embodied action when talk is not the main resource or activity" (p. 88). A textual narrative thus supports the visualization, with the researcher highlighting the qualities and roles of different modes at different points in time over the interaction. In this regard, Norris (2004) reminds:

> The task of a multimodal transcript is not to analyze the images that are incorporated, but rather to use the images to describe the dynamic unfolding of specific moments in time, in which the layout and modes like posture, gesture, and gaze play as much a part as the verbal. (p. 65)

Exploring an Emotionality of Togetherness

In the current paper, we build on the proposal of utilizing multimodal representations presented by the first author (Sampson, 2024a). Considering togetherness as a form

of group-level emotion (Carr & Walton, 2014; Crook, 2013), in what follows we focus on a particular episode and detail the intricate, co-adaptive moves via which students develop such an emotionality as a shared group project.

THE STUDY

Context

Data for this analysis were contributed by Japanese L+ English learners during wider practitioner research at a medium-size liberal arts university in Tokyo. Students were enrolled in a first-year mandatory English discussion course but were not language majors. The course was taught by the first author. It took place towards the tail-end of the COVID-19 pandemic; lessons had returned to the classroom, but students wore facemasks. The course aimed to help learners develop English discussion and communication skills, such as introducing and supporting opinions, utilizing appropriate verbal responses to convey understanding, asking for clarification, and integrating different viewpoints. Each lesson, learners were placed randomly into groups of three or four to work on these skills, culminating in a longer discussion. Specific English ability scores were not available for each learner. As such, the current paper makes no claims about findings in terms of language proficiency. However, upon entry to university, students' TOEIC scores were positioned between 550 to 780 points (TOEIC is a test of English language skills for business, popular in Japan. This score range is around B1 to B2 Independent User on the CEFR).

Data Collection

Data were collected from two angles. Firstly, students engaged in reflection in learner journals directly after each session. Although the journals were employed as one means of locating the significant episode upon which we focus, these data do not comprise the central concern of this article. Interested readers are thus directed to Sampson (2024a) for a more detailed description of their use.

The second form of data involved videorecording of lessons. As one component of emotions involves their expression (Cahour, 2013; Shiota & Kalat, 2018), it was expected that video recording might illuminate the dynamic, embodied and linguistic elements of emotions as participants interacted in discussions. Indeed, Lemke (2013) argues that "feelings … are expressed, and felt, over time. To show them, video is a far more appropriate medium … and is also richer in providing essential context" (p. 89). At the commencement of the research, learners all consented to being recorded and to the use of their images presented in filtered form. From the second lesson, 360-degree cameras were placed in the middle of groups, recording the (inter)actions of students. Unfortunately, it is not possible to judge how conscious participants were of being recorded. However, students seemed to readily become accustomed to the presence of the cameras. For example, although they made "peace" signs and looked directly at the cameras earlier in semester, such practices stopped from lesson four onwards. Such an observation aligns with the "widespread experience of interactional researchers … that an orientation to being recorded lessens over time" with "a methodological implication that the most authentic data is where recordings have been going on for some time" (Weatherall & Robles, 2021, p. 10). As the episode we explore occurred later in semester (see the following section), it is reasonable to assume that focal participants were not overly concerned with the video cameras.

Focal Case

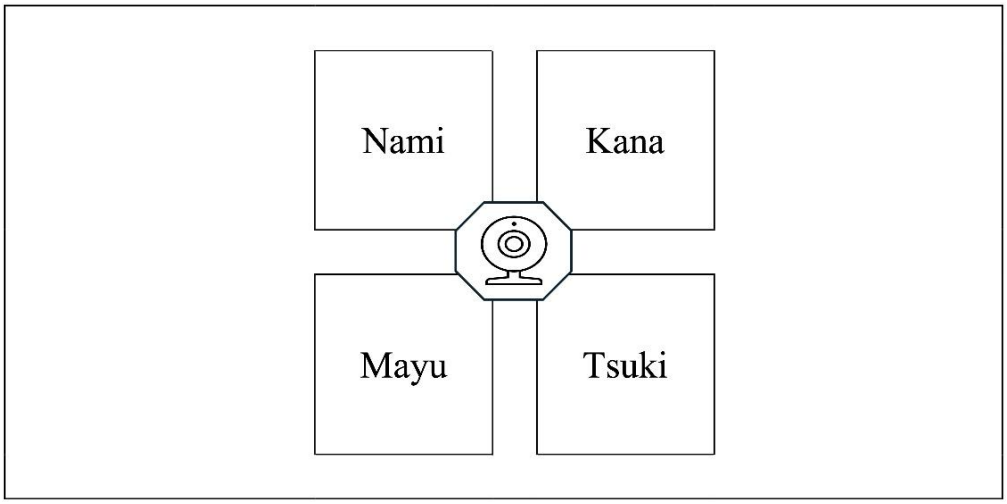
This paper focuses on the discussion of one group in the seventh session of the 14-lesson semester. The four participants—Mayu, Nami, Kana and Tsuki (pseudonyms)—were 19 years of age and identified as female. They had not previously all composed a group, though each had experience working with some of the others in prior lessons. During the discussion in question, their task was to consider different forms of Japanese popular culture to recommend to people from other countries. Additional information collected from student profiles is displayed in Table 1 [see Sampson (2024a) for a more specific treatment of how such features might

emerge in communicative interaction]. The small-group seating arrangement, with all members easily able to see each other from any position, is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. *Basic Profiles of the Group Members*

	Mayu	Nami	Kana	Tsuki
Hobbies	Singing songs and listening to pop music	Listening to pop music, take a picture, looking architecture. I love 60s~80s Japanese teenage culture and fashion	I like to watch baseball game and Japanese comedy "*manzai*"	Reading comics and searching fashion. The time of seeing many clothes is the happiest for me
Personality	I'm a positive person	I'm friendly and easygoing	Serious. Motivated to get my goal	I think I'm optimistic and patient
Overseas experience	I've never been to another country	California four years ago	I have never been overseas	I have been to South Korea
English study experience	6 years in school. I haven't good experiences with English	I only studied in school, but I don't have confidence to speak	In school and 5 years at conversation school	I studied for six years in school. I like English!

Figure 1. *Seating Arrangement of the Focal Group*



This case was selected due to a significant shared emotional episode during the discussion in this session. In the first instance, this choice was founded in contextualized understandings of the first author as a classroom teacher. Compared with his experiences of observing other lessons over the semester, he noted a rare degree of excitement in this group in this session, forming a distinct teaching impression [see also Sampson (2024a) for a more detailed focus on this aspect of selection]. Additionally, as Niedenthal and Ric (2017) argue, "researchers have come to agree that high homogeneity in the emotions experienced by members of a given group is a good indicator of a group emotion because it suggests that the whole group is experiencing a similar state" (p. 224). In the second instance, then, the learners themselves located this discussion as significant in their journals, concurring in their references to highly pleasant emotionality—enjoyment (Mayu, Tsuki), interest (Kana), excitement (Nami, Tsuki), and having fun (Mayu, Tsuki). Of further import for the current analysis, while the standardized course required discussions to have a fixed duration, two students (Mayu, Tsuki) implied disappointment that time for the discussion had run out—suggesting the kind of engrossment and interest found when people feel psychologically together (Carr & Walton, 2014). Moreover, amidst their reflections on enjoyment, three students seemed to expressly note a sense of shared experience—employing the plural pronoun 'we' italicized in the extracts—representative of togetherness and belongingness (Carr & Walton, 2014; Crook, 2013):

- I think today's discussion was very exciting… *We had many same ideas* for discussion theme. Therefor *we could tell our passion* for Japanese culture. (Nami)
- I noticed it is important to connect to former's idea. By doing this, *we were able to develop interesting discussion together*. (Kana)
- Because *we all had a lot of opinion to share* about Japanese culture it was so exciting. (Tsuki)

Analysis: Building a Multimodal Representation

Having become aware that the group's discussion in this lesson appeared to be emotionally significant, the first author repeatedly watched the videorecording—approximately 11 minutes in length. Simple notes of student behaviors, interactions, and impressions of what were interpreted as visible aspects of emotions and the "emotional climate" (Cahour, 2013) of the group were recorded. As Wiggins (2017) advances, rather than diving straight into transcription, the compilation of such notes is facilitative because "these documents can allow us to get a quick overview of our whole data set in approximately the same time as it takes to watch or listen to it in real time" (p. 93). After notetaking, the first author utilized Wiggins' (2017) three steps to develop an initial, regular textual transcription of the entire discussion: (i) creating a rough orthographic, time-stamped transcript; (ii) representing detail about the ways that things were said via adapted Jefferson transcription (Jefferson, 2004); and (iii) adding extralinguistic and contextual minutiae.

The second author joined the research from the next stage of analysis, in which we more fully textually transcribed interactions that drew our attention. One mode that proved facilitative in this selection was to make use of the soundwave of the videorecording, as "pitch, tempo and loudness signal emotional intensity" (Weatherall & Robles, 2021). The soundwave thus pointed us in the direction of differences between more and less intense areas in students' verbal interactions. We employed the ELAN software (ELAN, 2022) to take a fine-grained look at such segments of video data, being able to slow the playback speed and hone our notes on social dynamics over milliseconds. In this regard, Mondada (2018) contends that "the relevance of resources is locally achieved and established by the participants themselves in and for their situated action, exploiting and orienting to them as publicly available, meaningful, and providing the accountability of their actions" (p. 88). As we each added to the transcript, we discussed our interpretations of the ways in which such emergent resources—utterances, gaze, gestures, facial expressions, head and body movements, and so on—coalesced to build a shared sense of emotionality.

The final stage of analysis revolved around representation. In order to supply an accessible portrayal of key interactions, we turned to a multimodal (pictorial) display (Mondada, 2018; Norris, 2004). As Mondada (2018) remarks:

> Multimodal transcripts remind one that transcribing is always a selective activity (for speech too), depending on the objectives of the analysis, the granularity of the transcript, the private in-progress versus publicly edited status of the version, the recipient-oriented/reader-friendly character of the final version, and so on. (p. 88)

Considering our purpose in this study, we therefore selected video frames that might relay as closely as possible the natural flow of the discussion as well as illuminate the repertoire of learners' multimodal resources. Although a poor substitute for the motion of video (Lemke, 2013), we added arrows to highlight key movements. We then overlay frames with spoken content to pictorially and textually "describe the dynamic unfolding of specific moments in time" (Norris, 2004, p. 65) in the discussion. We adapted the contours of text to visually convey not only what participants said but also how they said it—the patterns of prosody, volume, shortening and lengthening they utilized (see the Appendix for conventions). In adding utterances, we endeavored to present them clearly without overemphasizing the spoken amidst the range of communicative modes mobilized by these students. We then drew on our notes to compose a narrative—a chronological telling of what we identified as especially vital parts of the interaction – interpreting the ways in which the embodied and vocal were interwoven in the emergence of the significant emotional episode.

REPRESENTATION & INTERPRETATION

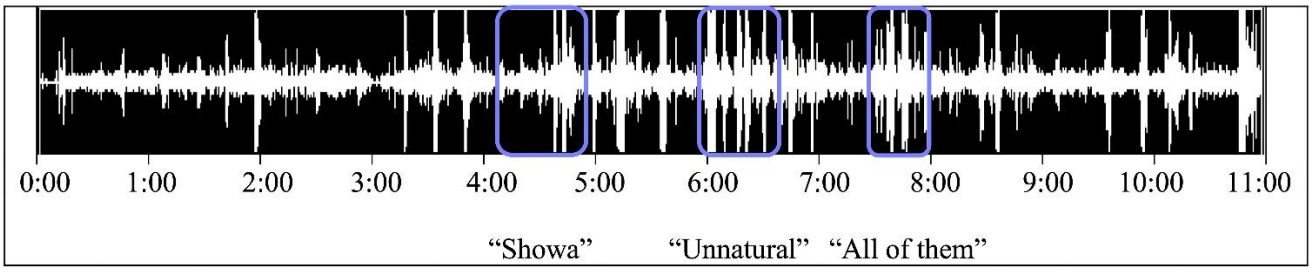
In what follows, after providing a brief gloss of the first four minutes of the discussion, we introduce three focal excerpts. These segments exemplify processes playing a key part in the development of an emotionality of togetherness for this group: the implicit adoption of Japanese conversational style (Fujii, 2012; Machi, 2020, 2025; Mizutani,

1993), interpolation of mutual transportable identities (Ushioda, 2009; Zimmerman, 1998), and the evolution of laughter. While separately highlighting each, the interplay between these processes is evident throughout the segments.

A divided beginning

Given the pedagogical focus of the course, students were frequently reminded that grades were determined by application of the introduced English discussion skills. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the first four minutes of activity witnessed the pattern of a single speaker introducing and supporting an opinion: Nami (kawaii culture) → Tsuki (kawaii culture) → Nami (addition to kawaii culture) → Mayu (J-pop music). Such a style is suggestive of learners' attempts to maintain the English conversational conventions of the course, in which ideas are predominantly proposed using direct declarative statements (Fujii, 2012). From our observations, and as reflected in the audio waveform (Figure 2), with one speaker and three listeners, there was little apparent excitement (and few spikes in volume). However, from just after four minutes, the discussion took a livelier turn, with correspondingly more intensity in the audio waveform.

Figure 2. *Audio Waveform of the Discussion Showing Focal Segments*



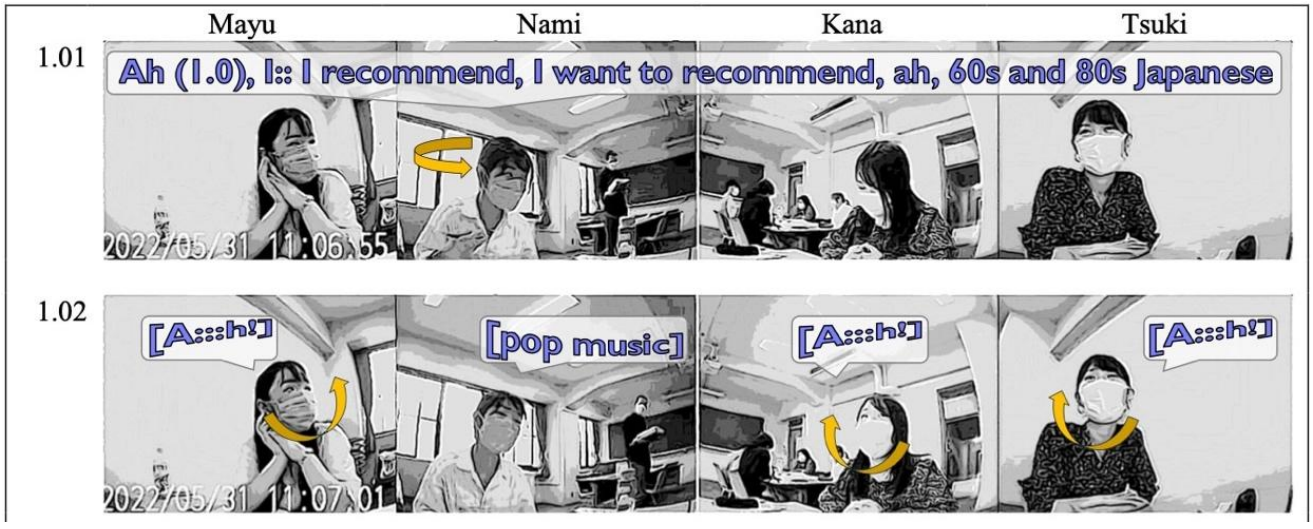
1. "Showa" and a switch to Japanese conversational style (4:12 – 4:47)

Importantly, "sociocultural contexts differ with respect to their normative and habitual interactions and relationships; emotions that are likely to be constructed differ

accordingly" (Boiger & Mesquita, 2015, p. 382). One way in which Japanese culture is divergent from the Western, English-speaker culture advanced in the discussion course is in terms of typical conversational style. As Fujii (2012) has shown, Japanese conversations involve a higher number of shorter turns, with frequent use of questions and co-construction to propose ideas, and *aizuchi* (backchanneling) to seek and display agreement and understanding. In light of such differences, the following exchanges reveal a shift from the preceding English conversational style to a Japanese conversational style, with a corresponding alteration in the emotional climate of the group (Cahour, 2013).

Immediately prior to the commencement of this segment, Mayu had been talking about her fondness for a currently popular musician. In continuation of the conversational style of the first four minutes, from Frame 1.01 of Figure 3, Nami takes over and employs declarative language to state her case—that she wishes to instead recommend older Japanese pop music—whilst engaging in a lighthouse gaze (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018) around the group:

Figure 3. *Showa*




1.03
I think, ah, this music, ah, we not feel old music
2022/05/31 11:07:04
1.04
[U:m]
[U:m]
2022/05/31 11:07:08
Yeah
Yeah
1.05
So, it is very
laughing
2022/05/31 11:07:11
1.06
laughing
very good
2022/05/31 11:07:12
1.07
[昭, eh]
昭和?
[Ye:s]
2022/05/31 11:07:14
(Sho, eh, Showa?)
1.08
Yes,
[yes, yes]
A:::h!
[A:::h!]
[A:::h!]
2022/05/31 11:07:15
1.09
Showa's era's music, yes
2022/05/31 11:07:16

After Nami's suggestion, in what seems to be a mixture of welcome and agreement, in Frame 1.02 the three listeners all respond concurrently with the vocal burst "A:::h!" (Cordaro et al., 2019; Shiota & Kalat, 2018). Changes in posture—sitting up, raising their heads—and a widening of eyes can further be interpreted as interest in and

appreciation for this recommendation (Cordaro et al., 2020; Goetz et al., 2010). As Nami continues her declarative statement, Kana and Tsuki then respond with the natural aizuchi of “U:n” (yeah) and nod, with Tsuki’s eyes clearly exhibiting a Duchenne smile (Frames 1.03 and 1.04). Interestingly, however, throughout these moments Mayu’s displays appear incongruent—she does not chorus the aizuchi, and in Frame 1.05 her eyes quickly track downwards, perhaps representative of increasing anxiety or embarrassment (Gregersen et al., 2017; Keltner et al., 2019). The source of this disparity with the other group members makes itself known in Frame 1.07: As Nami ends her statement, Mayu rapidly jumps into the discussion by asking “Sho, eh, Showa?” As she does so, she tilts her head to one side and taps her index finger on her hand. This act can be interpreted as inviting the support of her groupmates, letting them know that she has been confused (Cordaro et al., 2020) (“Showa” refers to a Japanese historical era from 1926-1989, and, indeed, referring to a part of this stretch of time in Western years is probably quite obscure for many Japanese. During the latter half of this period the Japanese entertainment industry greatly developed and many of these songs remain popular even today). As Nami confirms, she repeats and stresses the term “Showa’s era’s music, yes”. It seems that this confirmation then encourages Tsuki to offer the name of an immensely famous singer from the period (Frame 1.10). The laughter in Frame 1.11 coincides with Duchenne smiles from all members and Nami’s enthusiastic confirmation by rapidly repeating “Yes” five times. At the same moment, a shift in eye contact between Mayu and Tsuki appears to prompt the former to supply her own example, turning to Nami and again tapping on her hand seemingly to reinforce the message of her uncertainty of the name “Akina” (Frame 1.12). There is then a vigorous exchange (Frame 1.13) as Nami furnishes the missing surname—Nakamori—with Mayu repeating instantaneously and the two nodding and pointing at each other in an expression of shared understanding common to Japanese interaction (Arakawa, 2011). The whole group erupts again into laughter, with Tsuki’s amusement continuing (Frame 1.14) as Nami lists further singers from the period, and Mayu agrees in a smile voice (Haakana, 2010). The stanza comes to a

close with Kana uttering the appreciative "*I::i!*" (Nice!) while she engages in a lighthouse gaze around the group (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018).

As previously detailed, the first four minutes of discussion witnessed three of the students taking quite lengthy turns to propose ideas using direct declarative statements. Such a style continued up until Mayu's questioning of "Showa" (Frame 1.07). This addition effectively spread understanding across the members, in a fashion typical to the conversation style of these students' first language (Fujii, 2012). From this point, a mutual transportable identity (see the following section) as young Japanese people who nevertheless have an interest in and knowledge of "Showa music" is instantiated and shared in a particular fashion: Rather than longer, declarative statements, different members of the group rapidly weave an image together of this musical period, as first Tsuki, followed by Mayu and Nami lay out the names of various singers (Frames 1.10-1.14). Such an enterprise is commonly seen in Japanese conversations, with Machi (2020) utilizing the powerful metaphor of 'braiding':

> Japanese speakers, especially close friends, spontaneously access each other's utterances and stories, connecting them to jointly develop a conversation as if they were weaving strings into a braid. This is especially apparent when a conversation reaches a phase where speakers become actively engaged in a familiar topic. (p. 16)

That is, even though these students are conducting a discussion in English, Mayu's request for confirmation of "Showa?" marks a transition to the *kyowa* 'cooperative talk' style of Japanese conversation (Mizutani, 1993). Although Kana did not play such an active role in terms of turn-taking in this section of interaction, recognition of the change in style is perhaps evident in her journal reflection that "I noticed it is important to connect to former's idea. By doing this, we were able to develop interesting discussion together." Representing that these "speakers [have] become actively engaged in a familiar topic" (Machi, 2020, p. 16), from this point there is also an increase in the production of aizuchi, associated embodied actions, and laughter as

the members allow their ideas (and emotions) to converge. For instance, the original speaker, Nami, overtly accepts the contributions of the other members by quickly repeating “Yes” (1.08, 1.11) and “Yeah” (1.13). This consecutive use of an agreement token clearly conveys her excitement and welcoming attitude towards her interlocutors’ additions. Congruent with the close analysis of Imai (2010), such uses of positive aizuchi “suggest mutual approval on their comments” and serve to “solidify the group’s joint thinking” (p. 284), while they have also been located as a source of gratitude in L+ peer talk (Sampson, 2024b). Moreover, key words are repeated by members as they are introduced (Showa, Nakamori Akina), “showing acceptance of the new topic and willingness to participate in it” (Machi, 2020, p. 19). Finally, Kana’s summarizing utterance (*I::i!*—Nice!) as well as her embodied action of gazing around the group (Frame 1.15) both confirm and share the appreciation: As Strid and Cekaite (2021) note, such a ‘lighthouse gaze’ swept across multiple members, together with vocal and facial expressions that index specific emotionality, can work as resources to monitor, display, and guide emotional togetherness. Likewise, Kelly et al. (2014) note that shared expressions of positive affect have an important communicative function, conveying cooperative intent towards group activity and thus leading to more effective coordination, as well as increasing belongingness, or a sense of ‘we’. In this way, all members—including the original episode teller who does not feel their speaking turn is disrupted—enjoy mutually elaborating, and a sense of agreement and harmony commonplace in Japanese conversational style is spread across the group (Fujii, 2012).

2. “Unnatural” and the interpolation of mutual transportable identities (5:49–6:32)

From an ethical perspective, Ushioda (2020) reminds teachers and researchers of the nuanced identities of L+ learners:

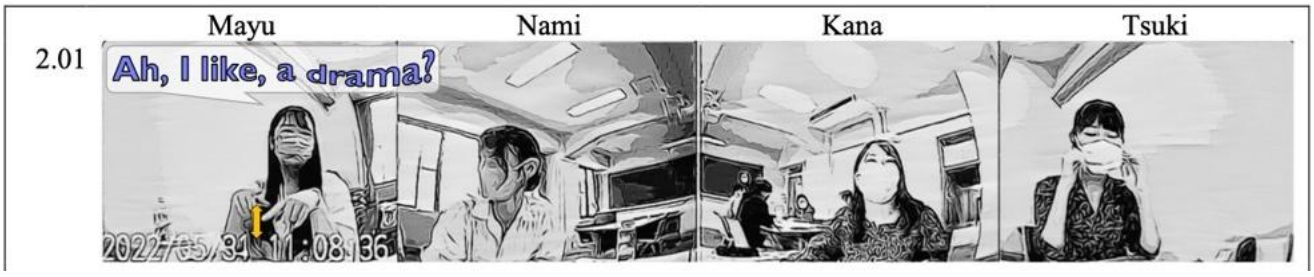
> We all too easily forget that the “subjects” of our theorizing are uniquely individual people, with all their complex micro-diversity and macro-diversity, who are engaging with the world with multiple motivations across multiple

> areas of learning, and who are located in particular physical, historical, cultural, social, and even virtual realities. They are not just "language learners", who are narrowly defined and positioned by this L2 learning identity that we impose on them. Rather, they are people who happen to be learning a language, among other things, in their busy lives. (p. 42)

Instead of pigeon-holing the people in our educational spaces, Ushioda (2009) encourages exploration of connections between L+ study and learners' 'transportable identities'. Although positioned to display certain identities in certain situations, people also have "latent identities that 'tag along' … as they move through their daily routines" (Zimmerman, 1998, p. 90). Within the course of talk during such "daily routines"—for instance, time in L+ classrooms—these latent identities may be instantiated and drawn into conversation. Richards (2006) argues that "introducing transportable identity in the language classroom—engaging as 'nature lover' or 'supporter of the English cricket team', for example…may have the power to transform the sort of interaction that takes place in the classroom" (pp. 71-72). Aligning with Sampson (2022, 2023), such discretionary interpolation of transportable identities had a key role in the emergent emotionality for these learners. What seems noticeable from both the previous and following excerpt, however, is that transportable identities were more affectively powerful towards togetherness when *mutual across* group members.

Following the previous section of talk, the group turned to Kana, who changed the focus to Japanese movies. Building off this theme, Mayu then commences recommending a particular Japanese television drama (Figure 4, Frame 2.01):

Figure 4. *Unnatural*




2.02
Un
Un, yeah
(Yeah)
(Yeah)
2.03
Unnatural is
2.04
O:::h!
O:::h!
A:::::h!
2.05
laughing
Yonezu
laughing
2.06
laughing
laughing
laughing
Yonez::u!
laughing
2.07
Yes
laughing
laughing
laughing
laughing
2.08
First, I want to ah, hear, ah


2.09
[listen] the Yonezu's
[Um]
[U:::m]
[Um]
2.10
[music]
laughing
laughing
[Yeah]
laughing
2.11
But the story is very good
2.12
Uh-huh
Oh yeah
Uh-huh
2.13
Ah, the drama is perfect
2.14
laughing
laughing
laughing
laughing
2.15
Story, characters,
cast, and background music
laughing
laughing
Uh-huh

In Frame 2.02, Mayu is invited to continue via the positive aizuchi “un” (yeah) of Nami and Kana, prompting her to provide the name of the specific drama whilst repeatedly tapping the air with her index fingers (Frame 2.03). Following elongated vocal bursts of recognition from all three listeners (Simon-Thomas et al., 2009), in Frame 2.05 Nami turns to Mayu, tilting her chin up and stating “Yonezu” (the name of a popular Japanese musician) in smile voice (Haakana, 2010). At almost the same time, the members share eye contact, and Kana repeats “Yonez::u!” as they display Duchenne smiles and burst into laughter (Frame 2.06). After pointing at Kana, nodding, and uttering “Yes” in confirmation (Frame 2.07), from Frame 2.08 to 2.10 Mayu concedes that at least part of her motivation for watching the drama is to listen to this music, ending with a smile voice and laughter which invites that also of Nami and Kana. Emphasizing that in her mind “the drama is perfect” (Frame 2.13), the stress of the final word again draws

laughter, with Nami and Tsuki tilting their heads back in a representation of amusement (Frame 2.14) (Cordaro et al., 2020). As Mayu then lists the key features making the drama “perfect”, she looks up pointedly when uttering the phrase “background music” in a smile voice, soliciting the laughter of Nami and Kana (Frame 2.15). Mayu continues by introducing the main theme song of the drama, again making a point of looking up at the group as she does so (Frame 2.17), with Kana then repeating it twice in a smile voice. Moments before Mayu continues, Nami adapts the title (Frame 2.18), and the group bursts into laughter as Mayu sits back to signify the end of her turn, waving her hands to the side and describing this song as “ve::ry, ve:::ry good!!” in a posture of pride (Cordaro et al., 2020).

We interpret the amusement shown, and further development of connectedness, as located within the mutuality of transportable identities for these learners. In a controlled experiment, Carr and Walton (2014) found “symbolic cues that evoke a state of working together” (p. 181). It may be that the mutuality of the introduced transportable identities—in this and the previous extract—acted as such a trigger to instantiate a sense of togetherness. Indeed, Nami’s reflection in her journal hinted at just such a possibility, as she mentioned, “We had many same ideas for discussion theme. Therefor we could tell our passion for Japanese culture.” A shared attentional focus by members (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017) on the mutual transportable identities afforded contagion of laughter and displays of amusement spread across the group (Hatfield et al., 1993), fostering a “sense of co-presence and connectedness” valued in Japanese culture (Machi, 2025, p. 220).

In the first sense, the students demonstrate their transportable identities as young people with shared knowledge of contemporary Japanese popular culture. As Mayu introduces the title of the television drama (2.04), the other members reveal their recognition (2.05) and further link it to the J-pop musician Yonezu Kenshi (2.06). Indeed, two of the students—Mayu and Nami—specifically mentioned pop music in connection with the hobby section of their profiles (Table 1). Such mutual identities are moreover performed when Mayu states the main theme song ‘Lemon’ (2.17), with

Kana almost instantaneously repeating and Nami humorously playing with the title, recasting it as “Melon” (2.18). What the students are doing here is expressing and sharing the “privileged access to relevant understanding” (Richards, 2006, pp. 71) that comes with invoking transportable identities during talk. As Sampson (2023) previously found, the emotional dynamics of L+ conversation can intricately hinge on expressions of such “relevant understanding” and the sense of affiliation they engender. In the context of this display of mutual understanding, and linking to our interpretation of the previous excerpt, Kana’s repetition could be considered as one of the most frequent types of Japanese conversational playfulness: teasing repetition (Machi, 2025). In Machi’s (2025) empirical work, the linguistic aspects of such conversational playfulness are combined with other resources like laughter, facial expressions, and a lengthening of vowels, all of which are apparent in Kana’s teasing repetition. Building on this joviality, Nami’s transformation to the word ‘melon’ then affirms and proactively develops this humor (Machi, 2025), all underpinned by the ‘insider knowledge’ afforded through the learners’ invocation of their transportable identities. That is, while Mayu’s detailed description of the drama and the members’ mutual recognition of the singer Yonezu Kenshi signal topic familiarity, the laughter, teasing, and embodied engagement surrounding this reference index a shared affiliation and ‘insider’ stance. These are features representative of transportable identities, not only through content but through the culturally resonant modes of interaction continuing from the shift to Japanese conversational style presented in the previous section.

In another sense, the mutuality of identities is moreover founded in the evolving span of the discussion itself. As Järvenoja and Järvelä (2013) found in general education settings, a “group’s history, the needs of the group, and group members’ reactions in different situations all contribute to how a group is able to activate a socially shared [emotion] regulation process” (p. 177). Two minutes earlier in the discussion, Mayu had enthusiastically recommended this musician. From that point, Mayu’s fondness for Yonezu Kenshi became publicly available shared knowledge as part of the relational history of these particular members. The group’s playfulness and

amusement can thus be interpreted as based in the surprising reintroduction of this musician when Mayu had professedly been promoting a television drama. Nami, who in her profile self-described as “friendly and easygoing” (see Table 1), takes up this opportunity as she teases Mayu by confirming “Yonezu” in smile voice (2.05), and as previously noted, later develops humor (Machi, 2025) related to the theme-song title (2.18). Mayu herself also draws on the group’s recognition of her partiality, playing on their shared transportable identities and creating “laughables” (Holt, 2011) via stressing words, smile voice, laughter, exaggerated gestures, and pointed gaze (2.07, 2.10, 2.15, 2.17, 2.19). In such ways, affordance of the shared surprise and humor had been ongoing from the instantiation of shared transportable identities minutes earlier, prepared further in seconds of Mayu’s verbal and embodied actions, and localized to this particular group and this particular discussion (Weatherall & Robles, 2021). Aligning with previous work into the dynamics of emotions in social settings, “the accumulated relational history of shared interactions constrains what [emotion] is likely during any one interaction” (Boiger & Mesquita, 2015, p. 387).

3. “All of them” and the evolution of laughter (7:29–7:48)

One of the most intensely motivating emotions for L+ learning is amusement (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017), with laughter a key tool to both invite and display amusement (e.g., Holt, 2011; Jefferson, 1979; Strid & Cekaite, 2021). In their study, Strid and Cekaite (2021) found that “cascades of publicly and visibly shared laughter between peers create an environment where [interactants], through talk and collective embodied stances, display affiliation and rapport and organize their peer relationships” (p. 183), forming “moments of emotional togetherness” (p. 171). Evident in the previous extracts and the following, such exchanges played a similar role for the current group members.

The final segment we introduce occurred over the brief period of 20 seconds around seven and a half minutes into the discussion. Directly prior to this point, Tsuki had been recommending Vocaloid music (a kind of modern music, developed in Japan,

which uses computer software to simulate a human singing voice). As Tsuki appears to mark the end of her turn by summarizing her opinion, Mayu quickly adds her similar appreciation for this pop culture (Figure 5):

Figure 5. *All of them*

3.06

(*chotto matte ah, mattetoka*: wait a little, ah, I said "matte")

3.07

3.08

(*nan, nandarou*: What, I wonder what?)

3.09

(*ma*: well…)

3.10

3.11

3.12

3.13 

In Frame 3.01, Mayu professes her like-mindedness with Tsuki, reinforcing her display of this connection by rapidly pointing first to herself, then Tsuki, then back at herself. Tsuki's verbal response (Frame 3.02) and posture as she sits up and widens her eyes suggests her surprise (Keltner et al., 2019). Perhaps prompted by Tsuki's expression, Kana shares this surprise via a similar vocal burst and quiet laughter. Grasping this opportunity, Nami interjects with a follow-up question, shifting her gaze between Mayu and Tsuki whilst gesturing to them both (Frame 3.03). Mayu instantly seizes the speaking turn (Frame 3.04), uttering the Japanese vocal burst "E::::h!?" associated with having difficulty deciding something or being at a loss whilst tilting her head to one side in a display of confusion (Keltner et al., 2019). Kana and Tsuki then laugh, continuing through Frames 3.05 and 3.06. Mayu maintains her perplexed look and abruptly injects Japanese expressions for the other members to "wait" (Frames 3.05 – 3.06). Although in Frame 3.07 Mayu adds the English "Wait" in parallel with a double-handed 'pause' gesture, she continues to struggle, and the laughter subsides while the members' gaze remains fixed on Mayu. Eventually, in Frame 3.10, Tsuki quietly assists by suggesting "All of them?" in a rising intonation and with a sweeping gesture of both hands. In rapid response, Nami shifts her gaze to Tsuki, raising her eyebrows in a display of interest (Cordaro et al., 2020). In Frame 3.11, while Mayu seems to reluctantly accept this proposal, softly agreeing "Y, ye:s", Nami laughs and makes strong eye contact with Tsuki. Nami then repeats both the gesture and suggestion of Tsuki, who echoes, while the whole group laughs and Mayu holds her head in her hands (3.12). She finally also faintly repeats "All of them" (3.13).

Throughout this section of talk—and those previous—laughter plays a pivotal role in sharing affect across the members and bringing them together. For example,

Mayu's instantaneous uptake of responding to Nami's question (Frame 3.04) suggests confidence yet is humorously juxtaposed with her rising intonation and the tilting of her head. This performance acts as a "laughable" (Holt, 2011), inviting reciprocation from Kana and Tsuki. Mayu sustains this display of a comically perplexed state, specifically via the embodied actions of deepening her head tilt and a face-touch commonly associated with embarrassment (Cordaro et al., 2020). As she exhorts her peers to "wait" in Japanese (3.05), she rapidly repeats herself, perhaps attempting to buy time, and then suddenly verbalizes her realization that she has been speaking Japanese (3.06). These utterances are furnished in smile voice (Haakana, 2010), with the final coinciding with her swiftly bringing her hand to her open mouth in shock and embarrassment (Keltner et al., 2019), gazing at the other members, and laughing, implying her invitation for their reciprocal laughter and affiliation (Strid & Cekaite, 2021). During these stages, Kana and Tsuki laugh, and although Nami does not join in the audible display of amusement, she gazes at Mayu and retains a Duchenne smile with her eyes. Such embodied displays have been revealed as supportive and gratitude-inducing for L+ students struggling to verbalize their thoughts (Sampson, 2024b). In Frame 3.10, additional verbal support is offered by Tsuki as she helpfully suggests "All of them." As previously noted, these kinds of assistance by L+ peers have been associated with enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), while saying something when an L+ interlocutor looks to be struggling appears to scaffold affective engagement (Baralt et al., 2016; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2024). Following, Mayu quietly takes up this proposition, agreeing "Y, ye:s" and adding a laugh and further downward look of embarrassment or shame (Keltner et al., 2019). As Jefferson (1979) classically showed, such an invitation to laugh by laughing oneself indicates that laughter is appropriate at this point. Nami is seen to accept this appeal, laughing as she then flashes a signal to Tsuki via strong eye contact. They chorus the suggestion of Tsuki in smile voice (Haakana, 2010) and mirror the exaggerated gesture, clearly marking these as playful and enticing laughter and amusement. As the first author found previously (Sampson, 2023), chorusing of information by peers in L+ classroom talk suggests affiliation and can be used to share enjoyment and

excitement. Moreover, in similar fashion to the way in which a formerly-introduced transportable identity set the stage for amusement later in the discussion in the previous “Unnatural” extract, the laughter here is again embedded within the history of interactions of these group members—the prior incidences of playful teasing and its acceptance afford the qualities of emotionality in this third segment. The playful atmosphere has been established in this particular group, with laughter emerging as both a representation and confirmation of enjoyment, offering a mutual affective focus (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017) as the group further share their sense of togetherness.

CONCLUSION

Encountering what we discerned as an emotionality of togetherness for L+ students during a classroom discussion, in this paper we have offered an exploratory interpretation of its emergence. Our analysis revealed three recurrent, underlying mechanisms in the context of this shared group emotion: the transition to their native Japanese conversational style even while interacting in the additional language of English; the introduction of mutual transportable identities; and the evolution of laughter and laughables. Via employing a multimodal representation, we hope to have provided an evocative depiction of the intricate embodied and verbal resources students drew upon dynamically across interactions affording this sense of emotional togetherness. Moreover, from a pedagogical point of view, the strong emotionality emergent in the context of students’ drawing in of their own transportable identities and their more familiar (native Japanese) conversational style implicates the benefits of teachers allowing language learners to “be and become themselves” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 223). It suggests that we provide learning environments encouraging learners to cherish their own identities and interactive styles rather than glorifying or compelling the primacy of other (e.g., L+ English) language identities. Work in this direction is especially important as we strive to decolonialize hegemonic L+ language (learning) structures.

Naturally, we concede the study has limitations, particularly concerning analysis. Due to the historical context, the participants were all wearing facemasks, which at times impeded the accurate transcription of both verbal elements and facial expressions. Another limitation regards the interpretation of emotions. Importantly, students themselves located the discussion as emotionally significant via their journal writing. However, the interpretation of learners' emotional moves as they were interacting in the videorecording is purely that of the two authors – the learners' journal reflections provided unfortunately little insight into specific moments of emotional intensity or meaning. One suggestion for future research may thus be to employ stimulated recall (Gass & Mackey, 2000) such that participants themselves watch their interactions and interpret their own emotionality (although, see Sampson 2023 for a critical view on use of such a tool in practitioner research). Finally, the study is exploratory and focuses on only one case. While we uncovered certain seemingly key mechanisms in the context of emotional togetherness in this particular group, we do not make any claims of causality. It would seem likely that the three mechanisms do not operate in isolation but play off each other—for example, conversational style might facilitate identity expression, which is affirmed through shared laughter, collectively assembling a moment of emotional togetherness. However, future work is necessary to more explicitly reveal the (bi?)directionality of such processes and the generalizability of findings in other L+ group (discussion) situations. Despite these drawbacks, we hope that this study might provide momentum towards expanding representational possibilities in developing a more localized and dynamic understanding of group emotionality in additional language learning.

Authors' Contributions

RS participated in the design of the study and completed data collection. Both RS and SM worked on data analysis and were involved in the writing of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the ethics board of the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research at Rikkyo University (no approval number was attached). All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment and data collection in the study.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

GenAI was used neither at any stage of the research nor preparation of this article.

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APPENDIX

Transcription conventions (adapted and abridged from Jefferson, 2004; Norris, 2020)

word (1.2)	A pause or silence, measured in seconds and tenths of seconds
wo:::rd	Prolonged sounds – the more colons, the longer the sound
word	Emphasized words or parts of words
word=and=word	Extremely fast, latched speech
[word]	Start and end of overlapping talk
tango	Japanese word (followed on first occurrence by translation beneath)
word?	Rising intonation (may be a question, but not necessarily)
Word	Dipping intonation
word	Volume decreasing
word	Volume increasing
word	Volume increasing in middle of utterance
A:::h	Rising / high pitch
word	Quiet / whispered utterance
word	Laughter / smile voice