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## Students' perezhivaniya and engagement in English language learning

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### ABSTRACT

Perezhivanie, i.e., emotional lived experience, is a psychological structure for understanding dynamic influences derived from personal and social sources. In this study, two Japanese university students' perezhivaniya (plural) of English learning in their final year of high school and first two years of university studies were examined using a dataset containing a semi-structural interview, informal interviews and a series of classroom observation. This paper describes these students' perezhivaniya of English learning and explains their engagement as 1. *in-the-moment responses* anchored in personally significant events or moments; and 2. *beyond-the-moment refractions* during re-visitation of these events. Language learning engagement is therefore experiential, situated and reflective from a perezhivanie perspective. The findings indicate that students' changing engagement in English learning cannot be fully understood if it is removed from the irreducible unit of perezhivanie.

### 1. Introduction

Learning or acquiring a second language is an effortful and deliberate process where sustained engagement is indispensable (Hiver, Mercer, & Al-Hoorie, 2021). Engagement is 'the place where learning happens' (Svalberg, 2009, p. 243). Learners must diligently and persistently practise and apply the target language (Mercer, 2019). Engaged learners are motivated (Dörnyei, 2001), more inclined to actively participate in language activities, and readily collaborate with others in conversational interaction using the target language (Phung, 2017). In essence, the significance of learning engagement in second language acquisition extends beyond merely investing time and effort. More crucially, learning engagement contributes to sustained participation, enhanced learning outcomes, and long-term commitment in language learning (Aubrey, King, & Almukhailed, 2022; Bai, Nie, & Lee, 2022; Lambert, Philp, & Nakamura, 2017).

A significant question is what promotes engagement when students learn or acquire a second language. In this study, language learning engagement is defined as students' participation and involvement in language learning (Ng et al., 2018; see section on Researcher Positionality for further discussion; see also Hiver, Al-Hoorie, Vitta, & Wu, 2024, p.202). Responding to this key question, psychological studies, treating language learning engagement as a personal attribute, have examined the motivational effect of cognitive enablers such as self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., Cai & Xing, 2023) and autonomy (Vo, 2023). Sociological studies have examined important influences derived from social structures on language learning commitment (Norton, 2013) while sociocultural studies situated language learning in relevant social context, highlighting the critical role of communities and interaction between its members

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in sustaining students' engagement (e.g., Lambert et al., 2017). Few studies, however, have adequately examined simultaneous influences derived from both psychological and social realms (Lantolf & Swain, 2020). Addressing this issue, the present investigation invokes the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie* (i.e., emotional lived experience; Vygotsky, 1994) to examine how dynamic interplay between psychological and social influences may energise English learning engagement of selected Japanese students who had experienced notable changes in their engagement in English learning opportunities in different learning settings - in school, at work and at the university.

The scholarly discussion of Lantolf and Swain (2019, 2020) underscores the critical importance of *perezhivanie* as a theoretical concept for researching language learning and language acquisition. While a limited number of empirical studies, such as those by Cross (2012), Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), and Ng (2021), have explored the concept of *perezhivanie* to gain insights into students' language learning experiences, a significant gap remains in addressing issues related to language learning engagement. In light of this gap, our present study stands as a pioneering effort in leveraging the concept of *perezhivanie* to investigate complex issues related to engagement in language learning.

This study is therefore significant, as it adds to the literature of language learning engagement an experiential perspective, drawing attention to students' lived experiences in language learning and how dynamic influences derived from the person, the context and complex transactions between these realms affect students' language learning experiences and engagement. This is different from a prevailing conceptualisation (Mercer, 2019; see also a review by Hiver et al., 2024) that classifies language learning engagement separately into cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions using a cognitive-individualistic perspective, giving limited attention to external influences. While Dornyei's L2 motivational self-system also considers learning experience a crucial component to understanding language learning, it remains, as Dornyei (2019) himself explained, a perceptual variable that lacks conceptual precision. In contrast, *perezhivanie* is an experiential concept that defines a unit of analysis highlighting inseparability and interdependence between person and environment, between cognition and emotion, and between consciousness and action (Roth, 2007; Veresov & Flear, 2016). It draws attention to students' language learning experiences that are personally significant (Blunden, 2016) and how students make sense of them. Therefore, based on a *perezhivanie* perspective, language learning engagement is grounded in students' personally significant experiences, encompassing both positive and negative moments, which provide an experiential source guiding engagement responses. This nuanced viewpoint stands in contrast to the prevailing approach that treats language learning engagement as personal attributes assessed through pre-determined and decontextualized survey items (Hiver et al., 2024), which at best, capture only facets of students' language learning experiences and engagement.

In the section that follows, research on language learning engagement is briefly reviewed to show why the concept of *perezhivanie* is needed. This is followed by an elaboration of the concept of *perezhivanie* and how language learning engagement is conceptualised using this specific theoretical perspective. Qualitative results derived from interviews and observations of two selected Japanese students' *perezhivaniya* in English learning are then presented. These are telling cases illustrating complex relations between *perezhivanie* and language learning engagement. The findings are discussed using *perezhivanie* as a theoretical guide, highlighting dialectical relations between the person and context, connections between emotion and cognition and the role of personal interpretation.

## 2. Psychological and social research on language learning engagement

Previous studies on language learning engagement have primarily focused on psychological processes, offering relatively less attention to social influences (Hiver et al., 2024; Mercer, 2019; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In psychological research, language learning engagement has been viewed variously as personal investment (Lambert, 2023), willingness to communicate (Aubrey & Yashima, 2023; Cao, 2011), heightened attention and involvement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), and intricate processes involving thinking, feeling, acting, and interacting (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Svalberg (2009) stands out as a pioneer in this field, defining engagement with language (EWL) as 'a cognitive, affective and/or social process in which the learner is the agent and language is the object' (p.247). In this model, cognitive engagement involves focused attention and knowledge construction in language learning, emotional engagement relates to positive sentiments towards the target language, and social engagement involves initiating and responding positively to interactive utilisation of language. This model aligns with Reschly and Christenson's (2022) multidimensional view of engagement or Fredricks et al.'s (2004) characterisation of engagement as a metaconstruct, encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

In a systematic review, Hiver et al. (2024); (see also Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Mercer, 2021) affirmed that psychological studies have predominantly adopted a multidimensional conceptualization (Fredricks et al., 2004) to explore students' language learning engagement as energised actions (Skinner et al., 2009) across behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Svalberg, 2009). This approach has been employed to investigate engagement in specific tasks (Bai et al., 2022), classroom practices (Vo, 2023), and language learning activities over an extended period (Aubrey et al., 2022). Ellis (2010) also applied this conception of engagement and proposed a componential framework to examine students' cognitive, behavioural, and affective involvement with oral or written corrective feedback. Following this attribute-based conceptualisation, studies on language learning engagement have examined behavioural engagement (e.g., Lambert et al., 2017; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), cognitive engagement (e.g., Kong & Hoare, 2011; Storch, 2008), emotional engagement (e.g., Aubrey, 2017; Henry, Davydenko, & Dörnyei, 2015), and peer interaction as a form of social engagement (e.g., Lambert et al., 2017). Motivational antecedents or cognitive enablers of engagement such as self-efficacy (Cai & Xing, 2023), autonomy (Vo, 2023), task interest (Bai et al., 2022) and willingness to engage (Wang & Mercer, 2021) have been explored, along with recent efforts in understanding facilitative classroom conditions (Wang & Mercer, 2021), engaging task designs (Lambert et al., 2017) and positive peer influences (Jin, Jiang, Gu, & Chen, 2022).

While these studies have significantly improved our understanding of the multifaceted nature of language learning engagement and its motivational drivers, limited attention has been given to examining interrelationships between separate engagement dimensions and how language learning engagement may change over time and across settings (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In the context of the current study, this psychological treatment of language learning engagement as an internal, multidimensional attribute has a major limitation, as influences derived from the social realm have not been sufficiently considered. Additionally, most studies have relied on surveys to capture engagement responses (Hiver et al., 2024), which offer a snapshot of a moment in time but may not fully capture the dynamic learning journey or evolving experiences. Surveys, being pre-designed and structured, limit respondents' ability to spontaneously express thoughts or elaborate on their experiences, thus providing a constrained view of language learning engagement.

Complementing psychological research on language learning engagement, research designed to examine the influence of social processes and conditions has drawn attention to the effects of social structure, classroom practice and task design on language learning beyond the confines of an individual's psychological realm. Norton's (2013) sociological concept of investment highlights the influences of social structures on students' commitment to language learning. Students' engagement in language learning is contingent on the extent to which their personal investment may lead to valued desired symbolic capital. Amidst this process, engagement can become problematic as students' investment in language learning is inevitably affected by their social position, negotiation and power struggles. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning engagement can be seen as emerging from shared norms, values and interaction among members of a learner community (Wenger, 1999). Empirical studies aligning with this sociocultural understanding have investigated dynamic influences derived from social milieus and situational characteristics such as peer interaction and teaching practices on learning English as a second language (e.g., Cao, 2011; Dörnyei, 2001). Recent studies (e.g., Aubrey et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2017; Phung, 2017) have examined how to design language tasks to promote language learning engagement, underscoring the importance of teachers' pedagogical approaches and peer influences (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Taken together, these studies highlight social and contextual influences on language learning and engagement. Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been given to dynamic interplay between the person and social realms.

Considering past psychological and social studies, it is argued that there is a need for a rich view of language learning engagement that allows simultaneous consideration of personal factors, contextual influences and dynamic interplay between them (Ng et al., 2018; Mercer, 2019). This is because students shape, while being shaped by, their language learning environment. In this study, the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994) was invoked to examine the complexity of these influences. Based on students' *perezhivaniya*, this study provided a dynamic account of students' language learning engagement, highlighting intricate relations between personal and contextual influences that past psychological and social research, including sociocultural studies has inadequately explored (Lantolf & Swain, 2020).

### 3. *Perezhivanie* and language learning engagement

*Perezhivanie* is a theoretical concept Vygotsky examined early in his academic career and revisited towards the end of his life (Vygotsky, 1994). There is no direct translation of this Russian term in English. In the extant literature, *perezhivanie* is commonly understood as an emotional lived experience (Blunden, 2016). Vygotsky proposes *perezhivanie* as a holistic concept for understanding child development. It represents simultaneously an individual's significant experience and one's personal interpretation of it. In 'The Problems of the Environment', Vygotsky (1994) used this concept to explain how three children, due to differences in cognitive capabilities and social roles, uniquely experienced and *differently engaged with* the developmental challenge posed by their alcoholic mother who bullied them when drunk. Aligned with Vygotsky (1994), *perezhivanie* as a personally significant experience in English learning (Blunden, 2016) or 'the drama of life' can be considered as a 'moving force' (Veresov & Flear, 2016, p.328) guiding language learning and engagement.

*Perezhivanie* is not just a phenomenon, but more importantly, a theoretical concept (Veresov & Flear, 2016). Using the case of three children, Vygotsky (1994) illustrates key theoretical properties of *perezhivanie*, including 1. The unity between the person and the environment; 2. Connections between cognition and emotion; and 3. *Perezhivanie* as a prism refracting external influences. Contemporary scholars such as González Rey (2011), Roth and Jornet (2016), and Veresov and Flear (2016) have further elaborated these key theoretical properties. Below, these theoretical properties are discussed and their implications for conceptualising language learning engagement are elaborated.

In relation to the unity between the person and environment, Vygotsky explains that *perezhivanie* is 'a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented i.e. that which is being experienced – a *perezhivanie* is always related to something which is found outside the person – and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e. all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in *perezhivanie*' (Vygotsky, 1994, p.342). As an indivisible unit, *perezhivanie* represents a relation between an individual and the environment, and 'if the relation is different, the environment exerts its influence in different ways' (Vygotsky, 1994, p.346). Therefore, Roth and Jornet (2017, p.15) maintain that 'a person and her lifeworld cannot be understood independently because each part is involved in defining the other'.

From a *perezhivanie* perspective, language learning engagement should not be perceived merely as a personal attribute (Hiver et al., 2024) nor solely influenced by interactive processes or social conditions or external demands (Cao, 2011; Norton, 2013). Rather language learning engagement should be understood as situated in and reflective of transactional relationships between the person and context that Roth and Jornet (2014) described as 'irreducible person-in-setting units' (p. 106). This theoretical tenet overcomes the conceptual divides between psychological and social studies, as discussed earlier, that focus predominantly on or give analytic primacy exclusively to either personal or social influences while failing to consider simultaneously complex influences derived from both realms.

Regarding the connection between emotion and cognition, [Vygotsky \(1987, p.282\)](#) explains that ‘thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, and our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotions’. Aligned with Vygotsky, [Roth \(2007, p.45\)](#) argues that emotion is ‘a constitutive element’ in cognition and action. In relation to *perezhivanie*, [Vygotsky \(1994, p.341\)](#) explains that *perezhivanie* is how an individual ‘becomes aware of, interprets and emotionally relates to a certain event’. In other words, *perezhivanie* signifies a process integrating both emotion and cognition ([González Rey, 2011](#)). The integration or the unity of emotion and cognition speaks against a simplistic linear view where the flow of influence is directional. Instead, [Vygotsky \(1993, p.232\)](#) describes the unity as ‘a dual dependence’, highlighting the dynamic relations between emotion and cognition.

Current studies (e.g., [Vo, 2023](#)), however, have compartmentalised language learning engagement into separate dimensions of emotion, cognition and action ([Hiver et al., 2024](#)). From a *perezhivanie* perspective, emotion, cognition and action are connected, forming integrated attributes of human consciousness ([Roth, 2007](#)). Vygotsky explains that ‘thought and affect are parts of the same, single whole and that whole is human consciousness’ ([Vygotsky, 1987, p. 336](#)). Language learning and engagement, as [Swain \(2013\)](#) elaborated, involve emotion and cognition that are inseparable. Students’ engaged and disengaged actions in language learning are undoubtedly an inherent part of this irreducible emotional-cognitive unity.

Finally, the role of *perezhivanie* as a prism indicates a refractive process where a person’s unique relation with the environment is established, turning a context into an internally configured phenomenon through an individual lens of emotional experiences ([González Rey, 2011](#)). When an individual refracts, they make personally unique interpretation of an event or experience, suggesting differential impact of the environment to an individual depending on personal conditions such as cognitive awareness and social role, as depicted in the [Vygotsky’s \(1994\)](#) illustration. [Vygotsky \(1994, p. 341\)](#) highlights the importance of ‘*finding the particular prism through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted*’. He further elaborated that refraction is crucial to understanding dynamic relations between the person and context that form a social situation of development unique to an individual ([Veresov & Fleer, 2016](#)). [Blunden \(2016\)](#) described this as a ‘predicament’ that one needs to overcome.

*Perezhivanie* denotes that language learning engagement is a uniquely personal refractive process, involving individual’s own interpretations, reflective of an individual’s understanding of critical personal and social influences on how and why they engage in language learning. Importantly, the refractive process involves also a temporal dimension whereby past and future language learning experiences or events may be used as an emotional-cognitive lens to make sense of one’s current lived experiences in language learning (cf. [Ng & Renshaw, 2019](#)). In this context, refraction signifies opportunities for change and transformation, including a change in engagement (cf. [Veresov, 2017](#)), as students re-interpret their past experiences in light of new/anticipated experiences or vice versa. Therefore, from a *perezhivanie* perspective, language learning engagement is more than a heightened sense of involvement measured separately in terms of cognitive, emotional or behavioural dimensions ([Hiver et al., 2024](#); [Philp & Duchesne, 2016](#); [Svalberg, 2009](#)). It involves a holistic treatment of students’ language learning experiences - past, present and future - and how they are interpreted and reinterpreted.

In short, the added benefit of *perezhivanie* to research on language learning engagement is the conceptualisation that *perezhivanie* represents simultaneously students’ personally significant events/moments in language learning and their interpretation of these learning experiences. In line with this conceptualisation, language learning engagement can be examined at two connected points of a *perezhivanie* in relation to its theoretical properties, as discussed above. First, engagement in language learning is determined by how students experience an emotional-cognitive language learning event where they make in situ decision to engage or disengage, i.e. in-the-moment responses. Second, it is determined by students’ interpretation of and reflection on their language learning experiences which can occur immediately after the event or when students revisit their past experiences at a later point of time, i.e. beyond-the-moment responses (cf. [Ng & Renshaw, 2019](#)). In addition, using the concept of *perezhivanie*, language learning engagement is not static but dynamically linked with past, present and future, drawing attention to shifting engagement that students may display over time, as they continue to refract their current experiences in light of past events and an anticipated future.

#### 4. The current study

The current study examined selected Japanese students’ engagement in English language learning in different settings. Aged between 19 and 20, these selected female students, Yuki and Sakura (pseudonyms), were in their second year of studies of a degree program on English language studies at the time of data collection. They shared a middle class background where English learning and academic success were highly valued for instrumental reasons such as entering a good university. They were selected for the current study because they had experienced significant changes in how they engaged in English learning over time based on an informal discussion prior to the study. Their cases are also illustrative of English learning *perezhivanie* as a personally significant event ([Blunden, 2016](#)) where language learning engagement is dialectically determined by a complex array of psychological and social influences.

Two research questions were set for this investigation:

1. What were students’ *perezhivaniya* of English language learning in high school and at the university?
2. What were these students’ in-the-moment and beyond-the-moment engagement responses associated with each identified instance of *perezhivanie*?

#### 4.1. Researcher positionality

In interpretivist research, many accounts “can be articulated based on the values, standpoints, and positions of the author” (Daly, 2007, p. 33). In this study, I present these findings as one possible interpretation of students' English learning experiences and their influences on engagement through a perezhivaniya lens. Perezhivaniya are past events. They are reconstructed during an interview, representing what one remembers, considers important, wants to share or omit (Brennan, 2016), and co-constructs with the interviewer (Talmy, 2010). In this context, in-the-moment responses in this study refer to learning moments that have already passed (except those moments I observed); beyond-the-moment refractions were reconstructed or co-constructed, as these students responded to questions about how they make sense of their past learning experiences of English. While these ‘filtered, refracted and mediated’ accounts of perezhivaniya are, of course, not a total or objective recall, they ‘do not hinder analyses of experience, but in fact, form part of a dialectical analysis’ (Veresov & Mok, 2018, p.97). This is because, when students share their perezhivaniya of English language learning in an interview setting, they share a ‘subjective dimension’ of their lives which is ‘imbued with a truth that is real to them’ (Andrews, 2021, p.355), enabling an analysis of complex influences of constitutional characteristics derived from personal and social realms (Vygotsky, 1994).

As a researcher with a persistent focus on learning engagement, I am fully aware of the possibility of conceptualising and researching engagement at different dimensions, situations and school levels (Hiver, Mercer, & Al-Hoorie, 2021; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). However, in this study, I deliberately adopted a general definition referring engagement to students' participation and involvement in language learning in order to encourage students to talk freely about their learning experiences and engagement without constraining it to a specific place or task or situation. After all, students' perezhivaniya in English learning can occur in different places, with different tasks and involving different people. Finally, my focus on students' perezhivaniya in this study does not suggest that I devalue engagement studies conducted using other psychological or social orientations.

#### 4.2. Recruitment and rapport

Yuki and Sakura, along with others (see Ng, 2021), caught my attention, as they shared with me in an informal setting, prior to the conduct of this study, their regrets in losing learning opportunities in the past, suggesting that their engagement in English learning might have changed. My research aim was to examine their engagement trajectories prior to the point of English learning where I had observed first-hand as to how engaged they were as an English learner in a conversational course.

I came to know personally, Yuki and Sakura, as I had interacted with them in my capacity as a researcher on a previous project examining students' goals for learning English. I did not have any power over them, as I was not an instructor in their courses or degree program. I approached them and others for this study, after seeking consent from the course coordinator who gave access to all the course components including the online blog. Yuki and Sakura participated in the study voluntarily and understood their right to withdraw their participation at any time. They also agreed to be interviewed in English, as I was not fluent in Japanese. This was a limitation. Addressing this limitation, during the interview, I adopted a non-judgemental attitude, assuring Yuki and Sakura that it was their experiences and feelings that I valued. Each participant was given sufficient time to elaborate their responses (Patton, 2015). Yuki and Sakura were fluent in English and did not seem to have any difficulties sharing their experiences and views. The good rapport I had built with them facilitated their honest sharing during the interviews, including their sharing of negative experiences and deliberate disengagement during their English classes in school and at the university.

#### 4.3. Data collection

Aligning with Vygotsky's genetic research approach (Vygotsky, 1978), this investigation was designed to examine English learning engagement as a process. The participants were in their second year of university study when they joined a semi-structural interview (60 mins; conducted in English) to share their English learning experiences in high school and at the university (addressing research question 1). To capture students' in-the-moment engagement responses, students were asked: What were your memorable English learning experiences? How did you feel about these experiences at that moment? How did you respond? To capture students' beyond-the-moment engagement responses, students were asked to clarify personal thoughts about their past experiences and how they made sense of them at a later stage (addressing research question 2).

It is important to capture students' current lived experiences in English learning, as the semi-structural interview was students' retrospective accounts of their past experiences. At the time of study, these students enrolled in a conversational course where they were provided a chance to interact with Korean students using English through online chats and synchronised presentations covering topics on personal interests and social issues relevant to Japan and Korea. Tutorial support was provided to prepare students for online chats and presentations. Six observations (45–60 min each) were made of these students' participation in the tutorials, online chat-rooms and video-linked presentations. In each session, qualitative unobtrusive observation was conducted and fieldnotes regarding students' engagement taken. Six follow-up informal interviews, each lasted for about 10 to 15 mins, were conducted immediately after each observation with each student to clarify their engagement in English learning in situ and whether it might be related to personally significant events they shared during the interview. Key questions during an informal interview were: How did you feel about the class? Why did you respond in a particular way? What would you say about yourself as a language learner in the class? In addition, students' posts on a course blog were collected, as the blog was designed for students to share their learning experiences in the course.



## 4.4. Data analyses

Jackson and Mazzei (2013) emphasise the importance of using data to think with theory. They characterise their ‘thinking with theory’ approach as ‘a plugging of theory into data into theory’ (p.266), where theory is integrated into data and vice versa. In this process, data and theory mutually inform each other, creating deeper understanding by carefully exploring the interconnectedness of data and theory. In the present analysis, two rounds of ‘plugging in’ (p.262) were undertaken, using firstly the concept of perezhivanie as an analytical tool to examine the wholeness of students’ language learning experiences, and secondly, a perezhivanie-informed conceptualisation of engagement, as discussed in Section 3. It is worth noting that Jackson and Mazzei (2013) discourage the use of coding in their ‘thinking with theory’ approach, arguing that traditional coding in qualitative research tend to reduce data to themes, and at best, ‘take us back to what is known’ (p.267). However, in alignment with their caution, the current analyses did involve coding, but it was not employed to oversimplify our data into predefined themes. Instead, coding was utilised to facilitate the ‘plugging

**Table 1**  
Perezhivaniya and language learning engagement - Two rounds of plugging in.

	Perezhivanie	Emotion	Cognition	Context (immediate & board)	In-the-moment engagement response	Beyond-the-moment refraction
Yuki	Y1 – Sleeping in class (high school final year)	Bored Embarrassed Frightened Supported	Achiever Performance goal Entering a good university	Translation practice Repetitive tasks Hot afternoon Preparing for exam Teacher's response Father's expectation and support	Unintentionally disengaged - sleeping	Overcoming engagement struggle – dealing with unappealing tasks Contradicting achiever identity Entering university as goal (Father's expectation)
	Y2 – Tutorial English (university year 1)	Frustrated Felt strange - speaking English in tutorial	Career goal (follow her father) Expecting English that is different to high school 'Useless' tutorial None cares about GPA	University English program Classmates did not use English. Tutor did not use English Repetitive exercises Japanese work culture	Intentionally disengaged Refused to complete tasks Did not speak English during tutorial Performance was not a concern	Finding meaningful learning opportunities; (university classes useless)
	Y2 – Working at Starbucks (university year 1) Y3 – conversational course (university year 2)	Nervous, Happy and Unconfident Excited Worried	Real English Getting better now Career goal Need more practice – Develop into an English user (not achiever)	Serving foreign customers; part-time job Japanese companies planning to use English as official language Conversational course – practice opportunities	Engaged with 'real English' Highly engaged in online chatroom, group presentation and during the tutorial	Met her expectation of learning 'useful' English Ignored disengaged classmates Goal – needing English for career in the future Her choice
Sakura	S1 – a game to win (high school final year)	Bored Hated – felt like a machine Excited- felt like a champion	Achiever Class like a factory Not care about her result Beating each other	English practice and exercises Teacher used Japanese to teach English High expectation from parents -getting into a good university Support from friends	Finished school work as quickly as possible (avoiding effort expenditure or spending time)	Dealing with English learning she hated Turning English learning into a social event - a game with friends
	S2 – a game to enjoy (university year 1)	Disappointed Enjoyed - interacting with international students	Am I not at the university – should English learning be different? Wanting to talk with foreigners using English Goal - Learning English for enjoyment	Practice-based English at University Tutor ran tutorial like teaching high school English class University as leisure land	Leaving tutorial early – deliberate disengagement	Decided to disengage from university English Joined international students social club A plan to do exchange in Canada
	S3 – differentiated engagement (university year 2)	Felt controlled during tutorial; felt free to engage in chatroom	Nothing to learn in tutorial Learning a lot in chatroom Wanting to learn English; wanting to use English to interact	Tutor controlled the class; Chatroom as a learning place - opportunities to meet and interact with Korean students	Remained disengaged during the tutorial – just sitting there! Highly engaged in chatroom and group presentation	Differentiated engagement Continued chatting with Korean friends outside the online chatroom Additional plan for engagement (visiting Korea)

in' process, allowing for a nuanced engagement with various theoretical concepts central to the current study.

In this analysis, the main source of data was derived from the semi-structural interviews, supplemented by informal interviews, observation records and students' postings on the course blog. To ensure the robustness of our interpretations, these distinct data sources were intertwined and scrutinised during the two rounds of plugging-in. We achieved data triangulation by juxtaposing insights from interviews, observations, and online reflective messages. This approach allowed us to validate our findings by cross-referencing data across different sources. Additionally, within-case triangulation was employed by meticulously examining students' responses in diverse settings. This involved a thorough analysis of different data sources pertaining to individual students, enabling us to gain a holistic perspective on their experiences.

In the first round of plugging in, students' interview transcripts and additional data were read and re-read to locate identifiable instances of perezhivaniya and their associated personally significant events or moments (Blunden, 2016). In this round, we grounded our analysis in students' own accounts. Two researchers independently located these instances of perezhivaniya based on students' own words and responses to questions related to memorable events. Subsequently, the researchers, in collaboration with the author, discussed these identified perezhivaniya and clarified the focused events in each case, noting particularly Vygotsky's (1994) use of the concept of perezhivanie and Blunden's (2016) theoretical characterisation of perezhivanie as personally significant event. Once finalised, each identified perezhivanie was coded in relation to 'experience' and 'interpretation' in order to understand students' lived experiences and how they make sense of them. This is in line with Vygotsky's (1994) conceptualisation of perezhivanie as personal experiences and interpretation. The coding results were compared, and clarification was sought through a careful re-reading of the data. Any discrepancies were subsequently resolved by the author in consultation with the coders.

In the second round of plugging in, the analytical focus is to extract students' engagement responses at two connected points within each identified perezhivanie, the 'in-the-moment response' and 'beyond-the-moment refraction'. Although students had already described their engagement responses in each identified perezhivanie, we revisited these accounts through the lens of three theoretical perspectives central to a perezhivanie-informed conceptualization of learning engagement, as discussed in this paper. First, we explored engagement as a dynamic interplay between the individual and the learning context by analysing the significant personal and situational characteristics at play, and how they formed an interconnected system (Roth & Jornet, 2016). Second, we delved into the complex relationships between emotion, cognition, and action at these two pivotal moments of engagement within each perezhivanie. Third, we used students' refractive accounts on their engagement responses in each perezhivanie to gain insights into their personal understanding of engagement. Specifically, we identified shifts or changes in engagement by comparing the responses across different perezhivaniya and how students made sense of these shifts. Once again, two researchers independently coded the data during this second phase. Their coding results were compared, and any differences or alternative interpretations were thoroughly discussed. In cases where discrepancies emerged, the author provided guidance and resolved them in consultation with the coders.

Through these two rounds of 'plugging in' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), students' lived experiences and their engagement responses in English language learning were reconstructed. We interconnected the personal and contextual factors influencing each student's learning experiences and engagement responses, weaving them into a comprehensive narrative that depicted their perezhivaniya and engagement responses. Table 1 highlights the key aspects of perezhivaniya and engagement derived from these two rounds of plugging-in analyses.

## 5. Results

An analytical account of the participants' perezhivaniya and their engagement responses were described. In presenting the results, perezhivanie is taken as a unit of analysis highlighting the relational whole rather than separate elements derived from internal and external influences. Students' in-the-moment responses and beyond-the-moment refractions associated with each perezhivanie were elaborated. Yuki's case was presented first followed by Sakura's.

### 5.1. Yuki's Perezhivanie Y1: feeling embarrassed and engagement struggle

Yuki identified herself as an achiever in English, which is central to her emotional lived experiences in English learning in high school. Reflecting on her school experiences, Yuki said 'I felt good every time I got a high mark in English tests and exams'. In addition to this personal focus on performance, social supports played a significant role affecting Yuki's English learning engagement and how she made sense of her lived experiences of English learning. In Excerpt 1, Yuki recalled an embarrassing event illustrative of complex influences derived from situational, personal and social realms affecting her disengaged responses (in-the-moment) during this emotionally charged perezhivanie. Refraction played an important role in Yuki's beyond-the-moment attempt to resolve the contradiction between her achiever identity and her disengagement in this incident.

#### *Excerpt 1*

'It was a hot afternoon. Very hot. I was working on a translation exercise. Very, very boring exercise. I did not know how, but I was asleep. When I woke up, Mr Sato [was] standing in front of me. I was so frightened. I did not know what to say. He said, take some rest tonight. It was embarrassing... But it never happened again'.

This dramatic event happened when Yuki and her class were preparing for the university entrance exam. Students were expected to put significant effort on completing practice exercises. It is obvious that Yuki was completely disengaged in this event. Her in-the-moment disengaged response was due to situated influences originated from an unappealing task and the hot weather. Yuki's shock

(frightened) was triggered by the teacher's unexpected presence (standing in front of me) rather than the unacceptance of her disengaged behaviour, as sleeping in class (*inemuri*<sup>1</sup>) is common in Japanese high schools and often tolerated (King, 2013). In this episode, Mr. Sato's response (take some rest tonight) indicates not just his tolerance of Yuki's disengagement, but more importantly, his care for and trust on Yuki. Reflecting on this emotionally charged perezhivanie (feeling bored, frightened, embarrassed, and stressed), Yuki explained that her embarrassment was due to Mr. Sato's 'high expectation' and her failure to live up to her identity as 'a top student in the class'.

Of note is the fact that Yuki did not intentionally disengage, as she 'did not know how' she had fallen asleep. Yuki's beyond-the-moment response was to overcome this disengagement incidence that contradicted her performing identity, ensuring that it 'never happened again'. When asked how she dealt with tedious and unappealing tasks, Yuki explained the importance of her goal of gaining entry to a good university, as her father, a senior executive in a large firm, always reminded her, 'everyone goes to university now. You must go into a good one'.<sup>2</sup> Her father sent Yuki to a *juku* (private tutorial school) to ensure that Yuki performed well in English and other subjects. Combining these social supports and her performance goals, Yuki was able to maintain effortful engagement on repetitive English exercises and practices that she 'would not complete' if she had a choice.

As shown in the episode, it is crucial to examine students' engagement responses to a specific learning situation or task within a broader context or over an extended timeframe. This approach is necessary in order to better understand how students make sense of their engagement in various learning situations. It underscores the significance of beyond-the-moment refraction in shaping students' personal interpretations of their language learning experiences and engagement responses.

### 5.2. Yuki's Perezhivanie Y2: feeling frustrated and superficial engagement

Yuki succeeded in getting into the university she had chosen. She enrolled in the English Studies program and set her goal to learn English for career purposes, as she wanted to 'follow my father (a senior manager) to work in a large Japanese firm where English is expected to be used frequently'.<sup>3</sup> She felt excited about the opportunities to learn 'English that is different' to what she used to have in high school. Contradicting to her excitement, Yuki, in Excerpt 2, shared a frustrating perezhivanie in a tutorial class where she considered English learning useless for advancing her career goal. Notably, contrast to her unintentional disengagement in high school (Perezhivanie Y1), in this round, Yuki's in-the-moment disengaged response was deliberate and intentional. Her beyond-the-moment refraction was to seek meaningful learning opportunities elsewhere.

#### Excerpt 2

The lecture was okay. But the tutorial was like oh, no, not again. It's just like our high school. Lots of exercises. They're useless. I did not do them. When the tutor asked us to speak in English, I felt strange because we are all Japanese, and we know what other [would] say. I did not want to do it. Other students did not want to do it. We ended up speaking in Japanese. Even the tutor did not speak English. English was not real.

In this episode, Yuki was frustrated (Oh no!) because she was given repetitive exercises similar to what she had in high school, which she indicated previously that she would not complete if she had a choice (see Perezhivanie Y1). In the context of advancing her career goal, such exercises were indeed 'useless'. The fact that her group members were reluctant to speak in English and that the tutor did not often use English in the class simply aggravated Yuki's sense of uselessness. In this social context, her superficial engagement was justified because it was meaningless to work on interactive language tasks that Yuki described as 'not real' and lacked commitment from others.

This particular perezhivanie became a predicament (Blunden, 2016) that Yuki needed to overcome in order to engage in English learning meaningfully. It also marks a change in Yuki's purpose for learning English. Yuki could have forced herself to engage, like what she did in high school to maintain high performance (see Perezhivanie Y1). In Excerpt 3, Yuki explained why she no longer cared about her performance and the tutor's expectation. Notably, Yuki drew attention to the fact that her personal response was reflective of a cultural norm shared among university students who simply do not care about their performance, as she pointed out that 'no one cares about GPA'.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Yuki highlighted a cultural practice of Japanese companies where limited consideration is given to university grades and in-house training will be offered to suitable employees (Kariya, 2012). It is in this cultural context of work that Yuki made a deliberate choice to refrain from working on language tasks that she considered 'useless' and to find meaningful engagement elsewhere (see Excerpt 4).

#### Excerpt 3

Yuki: I don't care about my GPA. No one cares about [the] GPA.

Researcher: Why? Did you not just share with me how performance was important for you in high school? How much you wanted to meet your teacher's expectation?

<sup>1</sup> According to Steger (2006), *Inemuri* means to be present and asleep. It is a form of public sleep in the class that is common among high school students who study late at night. *Inemuri* is considered a sign of hardworking rather than slacking in Japanese culture.

<sup>2</sup> Japan has already provided universal access to higher education (Huang, 2012). While opportunities to higher education have improved, it remains highly competitive for students who seek entry to prestigious private or national universities in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> English is used mainly in big firms and international firms in Japan. Japanese students take the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to demonstrate their English proficiency during the job hunting process.

<sup>4</sup> Graduating from a prestigious university is considered a guarantee for employment in Japanese firms, which give limited consideration on students' academic performance at the university during the recruitment process (Nakano et al., 2016).



Yuki: Yes. But it is not important at the university. Japanese firms don't care about your performance at the university. They provide training. But they want to know how well your English is.

Researcher: What about the tutor?

Yuki: I don't think he cares about me. I don't care what he thinks of me.

As Yuki's beyond-the-moment response to the predicament (i.e. university English classes do not advance her career goal), Yuki sought language learning engagement elsewhere. In Excerpt 4, Yuki recalled her first day of work at a Starbucks restaurant. Notably, this was indeed a perezhivanie moment, as Yuki's purposeful engagement in 'real English' at the workplace involved mixed feelings (feeling happy, unconfident and nervous).

*Excerpt 4*

'At the Starbucks, English is the only language when I speak to a foreigner. It is real. I am happy, but I am not very confident. I was nervous on my first day. But I think I am getting better now.'

This episode underscores the contextual nature of language learning engagement. From a perezhivanie perspective, the context does not confine to a specific learning situation. It is essential to consider the intricate interplay between historically relevant and presently experienced perezhivaniya. As shown in this episode, understanding Yuki's evolving engagement with learning English at the university becomes difficult without acknowledging its connection to her past language engagement perezhivanie in school (Perezhivanie Y1).

### 5.3. Yuki's Perezhivanie Y3: feeling excited and meaningful engagement

In the second year of university studies, Yuki enrolled in a conversational course. The observation record showed that Yuki was active in the online chatroom where she engaged in conversation with others in a relaxed and joyful mood. Yuki and her group gave a presentation on the importance of English for job hunting in Japan. Yuki was highly engaged during the presentation and active in answering questions. During the tutorial, Yuki actively responded to the tutor's questions and often led discussion.

Her active participation in the course (in-the-moment responses based on observation records) was a stark contrast to her superficial engagement in Perezhivanie Y2. At the interview, explaining her engagement, Yuki shared a perezhivanie moment where a conversation with her father aroused mixed feelings (feeling excited and worried) and prompted her enrolment in the conversation course (see Excerpt 5).

*Excerpt 5*

Researcher: What did your father show you?

Yuki: He showed me a news [report]. Honda was planning to use English as an official language.<sup>5</sup>

Researcher: How did you feel about it?

Yuki: I felt excited and worried because I was not very confident in English speaking.

Researcher: But you were achieving. You did well in all the exams.

Yuki: Yes, but they were not about using English. I need to be a user. I meet foreigners at the Starbucks. I need more practice.

Researcher: I see. What did you do?

Yuki: I enrolled in this conversational English and I want to use English as much as possible.

Researcher: Are you a user now?

Yuki: I am learning to be a user. I am getting better.

Yuki's deep engagement in English learning cannot be fully understood if it is removed from her lived experience of English learning in light of her career goals and her father's support. In this excerpt, Yuki directed my attention to the insufficiency of exam<sup>6</sup> ('they were not about using English') in preparing her to be an 'English user' and the importance of practice for this aspiring identity. Reflecting on her chatroom experience, Yuki wrote on the course blog, commenting that the course gave her 'real opportunities to use English with real people'. Yuki further shared that her father had found her an internship opportunity at Uniqlo, an international fashion company, where English was adopted as the official language. Yuki felt excited about this opportunity and commented that 'I can be a real user of English at Uniqlo'.

While Yuki was found to be engaging in her class, some of her classmates, based on our observation records, were reluctant to speak and did not seem to be excited about the learning opportunities, especially during the tutorial. Yuki, who once was put off by others' disengagement (see Perezhivanie Y2), explained that 'I need to practise more. Others may not need English for their future. But I need it and it is my choice'. Yuki's reflective response indicates that her perezhivanie is uniquely personal and that her active engagement, in contrast with others' disengagement, was illustrative of dialectical relations between her personal goals and social influences.

From a perezhivanie perspective, it is evident that language learning engagement represents a highly individualised response by

<sup>5</sup> Honda has made English its official corporate language for international communication by 2020 ([Japan Times, 2015](#)). Other large Japanese firms, such as Shiseido and Uniqlo, also followed suit.

<sup>6</sup> English exams in Japan have focused mainly on grammatical knowledge, comprehension and translation giving limited coverage on speaking skills, despite government reforms and initiatives that attempted to change the focus ([Hiramoto, 2022](#)). Since 2020, university entrance exams have begun to assess students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The current study predated this major policy change.

students, highlighting the centrality of refraction. As shown in this episode, Yuki affirmed the importance of learning English to her future career. It is through this highly personal lens that Yuki was able to remain engaged in the tutorial while others showed reluctance to engage. This emphasises the crucial impact of refraction on language learning engagement.

#### 5.4. *Sakura's Perezhivanie S1: a game to win*

Like Yuki, Sakura was an achieving student in English in high school. She always received good grades in English, which pleased her. However, her English learning experiences were negative. In Excerpt 6, Sakura explained why she felt bored in her English class and shared a memorable event where Sakura, along with her friends, came up with a plan to maintain their engagement on language tasks that they disliked.

##### *Excerpt 6*

Researcher: How did you feel about English learning in high school?

Sakura: My English class was boring. It's all about practice and translation, and comprehension exercises nearly everyday. The class felt like a factory and I was like a machine. I really hated it. I tried to finish everything as quickly as possible.

Researcher: But you did well?

Sakura: Yes. But I don't really care about my result; it is just because [of] the university entrance exam and because my parents wanted me to get into a good university.

Researcher: So, you didn't like your English class in high school at all?

Sakura: I hated it. Not much to learn. We did not speak English at all. Our teacher used only Japanese in the class.<sup>7</sup>

Researcher: Then how did you manage to spend time on English learning that you hated?

Sakura: Ah, we had a trick. We turned it into a game. My friends and me, four people, we set goals for ourselves. We tried to beat each other by getting the [right] answers. It's fun. The person [who] gets the highest mark wins. The first time I won, I felt like a champion. This was how we helped each other.

This interview excerpt reveals Sakura's engagement struggles, as she recalled her emotionally disengaging experiences in high school. Her characterisation of the English class as a factory and herself as a machine, emphatically affirmed her negative feeling about the class (feeling bored) and vividly conveyed a sense of reluctance in her in-the-moment engagement (I really hated it. I tried to finish everything as quickly as possible). While meeting parental expectation and passing the university entrance exam were somewhat important to Sakura, her reflection, responding to the interviewer's query about her strong dislike of her English class, indicates an unfulfilled desire of using English as medium of instruction and for learning (There is not much you can learn. And we did not speak English at all). Due to this unfulfilled desire, combined with her reluctance to engage, Sakura faced a predicament that she overcame with 'a trick' by competing with her friends. This beyond-the-moment response was calculated and creative, turning English learning into a social event where winning against her friends was in fact a shared practice of supporting each other's engagement in unmotivating English tasks. Sakura's winning moment – feeling like a champion was indeed a joyful *perezhivanie*. Reflecting on her English learning experience, Sakura said 'without my friends, school would feel like hell and doing the repetitive exercises would make me cry'.

Viewed through the lens of *perezhivanie*, Sakura's case illustrates the integral social dimension that underlies engagement responses and refraction. In this context, Sakura and her friends crafted an effective strategy for addressing the hurdles they encountered in their practice-based English language learning journey. Sakura's strategic response represents a collective solution aimed at ameliorating the shared engagement issues that she and her peers encountered, providing a glimpse to a refractive process that is not just individual but also collaborative in nature.

#### 5.5. *Sakura's perezhivanie S2: a game to enjoy*

At the university, Sakura made special effort to move away from practice-based English learning that she 'hated'. She, however, was disappointed because 'doing many courses in the first year just felt like that I was still in high school' where English language learning involved mostly completing exercises and practices (see S1). Recounting her disappointment, Sakura related a memorable episode where the tutor acted like a high school teacher checking students' answers to a comprehension worksheet. Her in-the-moment response to the tutorial was to minimise engagement by intentionally leaving early.

##### *Excerpt 7*

'We had this tutor who treated us like high school students. He often asked us to do reading comprehension exercises and then checked our answers. I did not like it. It reminded me [of] my high school English class. I thought, am I not at the university? That is not [the kind of] English that I wanted. I still went to the tutorial, but I always found an excuse to leave early.'

*Perezhivanie* is a sense-making process where one can revisit the past and explore future possibilities in light of their current lived experiences (Ng & Renshaw, 2019). In this *perezhivanie*, Sakura was reminded of past experiences of practice-based English learning that she disliked. Her question – 'am I not at the university' suggests that she queried the relevance of practice-based English in

<sup>7</sup> English in Japan is taught mostly through a grammar-translation approach with a focus on analysing and translating sentences or longer passages using Japanese. Sakura's teacher clearly adopted this instructional practice, which was demotivating (Falout, Elwood & Hood, 2009).

university language education. When asked the type of English learning that she desired, Sakura indicated that she wanted to 'learn English to talk with foreigners', which prompted her to join a social club for cultural exchange where she met and interacted with international students. This reflective response (beyond-the-moment) is not just illustrative of her goal for learning English to speak with foreigners but also social influences derived from the culture of 'leisure land'<sup>8</sup> where Japanese undergraduates shift their focus from academic studies to social activities and personal development. In line with this cultural practice, Sakura actively sought new friendship and joined the social club for cultural exchange where international and local students shared their cultures through different kind of social activities. Sakura joined this special club to improve her spoken English and learn about the cultures of English-speaking international students. In Excerpt 8, Sakura identified herself as a gamer and drew attention to a change in the learning context and a change in purpose for learning English. Using 'a gaming language', Sakura explained that her engagement focus for learning English at the university 'level' was enjoyment, which was radically different to her focus on 'winning' in high school, 'the previous level' (see Perezhivanie S1). Her joyful interaction with international students led to further engagement in English learning – a plan for doing an exchange program in Canada.

*Excerpt 8*

Researcher: How would describe yourself as an English learner now?

Sakura: Em, it is still a game. I am still a gamer. But this time, I am here to enjoy the game.

Researcher: You're not interested in winning anymore, I suspect.

Sakura: Ah, that was the previous level. In this level, it's about learning and enjoy[ment].

Researcher: I see. What do you enjoy?

Sakura: I enjoy learning new words, meeting new friends and getting to know different cultures. I have planned to do an exchange in Canada next year.

From a perezhivanie perspective, this episode once again underscores the pivotal role of refraction in shaping language learning engagement. Sakura's self-identification as a gamer who approached English language learning with different motivations in school and at the university highlights the substantial impact of refraction beyond the immediate moment of engagement. It is in this beyond-the-moment stage of refraction that Sakura made a conscious choice to disengage from the language tutorials and actively seek meaningful learning opportunities elsewhere.

### 5.6. Sakura's perezhivanie S3: differentiated engagement

Sakura's enjoyment about English communication led her to enrol in the conversational English course. Based on the observation records, Sakura participated eagerly in the chatroom where the group talked about dating in Japan and Korea. She shared with the group a joyful event when she dated her boyfriend at the Yokohama Warehouse. As for the online presentation, Sakura and her group conducted a presentation on a topic related to marriage in Japan. In her reflection about the course, Sakura said, 'I really enjoy the course and meeting [the] Korean students'. Nevertheless, her superficial engagement in the tutorial was a stark contrast to her active involvement during the chatroom and online presentation. She was slow to participate in the tutorial activities, and in particular, rather reluctant in responding to the tutor's questions. Excerpt 9 shows a perezhivanie moment where Sakura explains her contrasting feelings and differentiated engagement.

*Excerpt 9*

Researcher: what happened at the tutorial? You do not seem to enjoy as much as you do during the chatroom and presentation?

Sakura: Oh, I just don't like the way the tutor controls the class. It reminds me [of] my high school class. The chatroom is different. There is no tutor. We can just talk freely.

Researcher: I see. So, you feel free in the chatroom. Does it mean that you feel controlled during the tutorial?

Sakura: Yes! Yes! I just sit there, doing nothing. There is nothing to learn. But I learn a lot during the chatroom. I just want to learn English and use it to talk to other people in the future.

This excerpt shows that Sakura's perezhivanie is comprised of complex connections between past, present and a desired future. She moved across timespaces in accounting her engagement responses, bringing up her past, comparing it to her present encounters, and reiterating a future that she desired (talk to other people in the future [using English]). Her differentiated engagement in English learning during the tutorial and chatroom entails contrasting emotions (feeling controlled vs feeling free) and cognition (tutorial as a sitting place vs chatroom as a learning place) that cannot be understood sufficiently if they are not linked with her past perezhivanie of English learning in high school and a future she desired. Of note was her emphatic response (Yes! Yes!) when I rightly summarised her contrasting feelings and invited her confirmation. This perezhivanie suggests that Sakura's engagement struggles continued, as she pursued her learning goal – learning English for communication. To achieve this goal, Sakura decided to make a visit to Korea at the end of the year to meet her Korean friends who continued chatting with her outside the online chatroom.

To understand Sakura's differentiated engagement in different language learning settings, it becomes essential to recognise that attributing her contrasting responses solely to situational factors offers, at best, an incomplete explanation of her contrasting engagement patterns. From a perezhivanie perspective, this episode underscores the importance of understanding the intricate

<sup>8</sup> The culture of 'leisure land' is a shared understanding that "university life is a well-deserved four year moratorium or 'leisure land' between 'examination hell' and a life time of regimented employment" (Doyon, 2001, p.446).

connections among various perezhivaniya— past and present, as well as those anticipated in the future.

## 6. Discussion

At the core of research on language learning engagement lies a crucial inquiry into its triggers. Mercer (2019) advocates for a holistic framework to understand language learning engagement, suggesting that it can arise from students' engagement experiences while also being influenced by intra-psychological antecedents. Likewise, Hiver, Mercer, and Al-Hoorie (2021) assert that 'a learner's engagement does not emerge in a vacuum, but is the consequence of a learner's psychology interacting with social and contextual variables over time' (p. 2). The current study makes a significant contribution by advancing a nuanced perspective in line with Mercer's and Hiver's propositions. It adopts the Vygotskian concept of perezhivanie, redirecting attention towards the intricate interplay between personal and social influences. Furthermore, it promotes a unit of analysis that encompasses influences from both realms and delves into their intricate transactions.

Using the concept of perezhivanie, this study examined two Japanese students' English learning experiences and their engagement responses. Perezhivanie as a generative unit (Roth & Jornet, 2016, p. 317) can be taken as an experiential source guiding students' language learning engagement. It draws attention to language learning engagement that is uniquely personal, emotionally charged and anchored in personally significant events or moments (Blunden, 2016). As perezhivanie involves personally significant experience and its interpretation, language learning engagement in this study was captured as students' in-the-moment responses during a personally significant event or moment and beyond-the-moment refraction of their experience. Complex relationships exist between these two important points of engagement, as shown in the findings. To further elaborate how perezhivaniya mediate English learning engagement and instigate changes in engagement, the current findings, with a focus on in-the-moment and beyond-the-moment engagement responses, are discussed below using three theoretical tenets inherent to the concept of perezhivanie, namely, person-context transaction, emotion-cognition connection, and refraction (Vygotsky, 1994; see also González Rey, 2011; Roth & Jornet, 2016; Veresov & Fleeer, 2016).

### 6.1. Person-context transactions

Students' engagement responses in English learning, as shown in this study, involve dialectical relations between the person and context that each student uniquely experienced, which Vygotsky (1994, p.302) describes as 'indivisible unity'. In each identified perezhivanie, students' engagement responses at both in-the-moment and beyond-the-moment stages were dynamically affected by a unique set of personal concerns, situated conditions and social influences, which are crucial for understanding complex relations, and in particular, contradictory orientations of engagement between these two stages. If these unique sets of personal and social factors are not considered, it would be hard to make sense of, for example, why Yuki and Sakura were able to persist, each in a unique way, with language learning tasks that they strongly disliked in high school (Perezhivanie Y1 and S1). In addition, a change in context signifies the operation of a different set of personal and social factors affecting students' English learning experiences and how they engage. For example, Yuki and Sakura after moving into the university decided to superficially engage in university classes that they devalued. This engagement response was intentional and contradicted the way they maintained their engagement on language tasks that they disliked in high school. This was because Yuki's concern about performance and meeting social expectation was replaced by a career goal heavily influenced by her father and her understanding of Japanese work culture. As for Sakura, her gaming focus of winning were replaced by a new focus on enjoyment and student exchange set in a culture of 'leisure land' widely shared among Japanese undergraduates.

### 6.2. Inseparability of emotion, cognition and action

Perezhivanie as a phenomenon is associated with personally significant events filled with distinct emotions, an aspect that is 'previously-overlooked' (Veresov & Mok, 2018, p.94). As shown, the participants' perezhivaniya were filled with strong emotions that linked with cognitions and actions in a complex manner (Blunden, 2016; Roth & Jornet, 2016). For example, both participants experienced negative emotions when learning English in school, which could have led to disengaged actions. Nevertheless, each student dealt with their negative emotions through deliberate acts of refraction. Their beyond-the-moment refractions are illustrative of Vygotsky's (1971) conception of 'intelligent emotions' (p.212) where emotion is subjected to thought, and hence their unique way of overcoming negative emotions and maintaining engagement in language tasks they disliked. More importantly, students' emotions, as demonstrated in this study, play a critical role in instigating a change process setting off new goals (cognition) and engagement responses in English learning (action). For example, Yuki's mixed feelings (feeling excited and worried) in Perezhivanie Y3 prompted her enrolment in the conversational course (action) in order to achieve her career goal of using English for work purposes (cognition). Sakura's contrasting feelings about the tutorial (feeling controlled) and the chatroom (feeling free) were associated with her differentiated engagement (action), as she affirmed her valuing of conversational English (cognition).

### 6.3. Refraction

Refraction is important for understanding students' engagement in English learning and its changes, as refraction determines which factors, personal and social, are personally significant in each event (Vygotsky, 1994), and hence, rendering English learning engagement personally meaningful or meaningless (Blunden, 2016). The findings showed that in each perezhivanie, refraction

enables, especially during the beyond-the-moment stage, students to take an analytical and reflective position to look closely on their English learning experiences, weigh up influences, and most importantly, establish a personal meaning of English learning engagement. (Vygotsky, 1994). Two distinct roles of refraction in guiding language learning engagement are notable. First, through refraction, the participants directed their engagement focus on English learning that they valued. For example, Yuki and Sakura strategically disengaged from university classes that resembled their high school experiences and sought meaningful engagement elsewhere. During this refractive process, Sakura raised the question, 'am I not at the university?', to ascertain her expectation for English learning that is conversational. Similarly, Yuki's emphatic response, 'Oh, no! Not again!', was a refractive moment where she expressed her frustration with English that she considered 'useless' and directed attention to seeking English learning opportunities that she deemed useful to her career goal. Second, refraction helped these students overcome dilemmas or difficult situations (Veresov & Mok, 2018). For example, Yuki and Sakura overcame engagement struggles in an unmotivating learning environment in high school by turning English learning into a personally meaningful event (a performance event for Yuki and a social event for Sakura). Similarly, in perezhivanie Y3, Yuki overcame the negative influence of disengaged peers in the tutorial, a negative factor prompting her withdrawal in her first year in perezhivanie Y2, by focusing on her career goal. Likewise, Sakura's differentiated engagement in the tutorial versus the online classes (perezhivanie Y3) was the result of an appraisal of these course components in light of the type of English she valued and devalued. Refraction draws attention to negative experience not as an off-switch in language learning engagement, but as a predicament that needs to be overcome (Blunden, 2016).

It is important to point out that language learning engagement of the reported cases can be analysed or understood using alternative perspectives or models, as discussed in the literature review. For example, the struggles faced by both Yuki and Sakura in high school regarding engagement can be interpreted from a cognitive or psychological standpoint, highlighting the importance of self-efficacy and performance goals. Yuki's career considerations can be viewed as a personal aspiration to acquire valued symbolic capital, aligning with Norton's sociological theory of investment. The competitive game devised by Sakura and her friend to tackle disliked learning tasks can be viewed as establishing new norms in their interaction, reflecting shared goals from the perspective of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Nevertheless, as elucidated earlier in the paper, reducing language learning engagement to either a personal attribute, a sociological construct, or a community process through these alternative perspectives has limitations. While each perspective holds significance, none alone can offer a holistic view that enables a more comprehensive understanding of students' language learning engagement, taking into account the intricate transactions between the individual and the context, while simultaneously highlighting students' emotional responses and sense-making. Previous psychological (e.g., Lambert et al., 2017) and social research (e.g., Cao, 2011) has not been able to capture the complexity of language learning engagement, as found in the current study.

## 7. Implications, limitations and future research

This study enhances our understanding of how perezhivanie plays a pivotal role in mediating language learning engagement. It underscores the intricate interplay between students' engagement responses in various language learning contexts and their individual interpretations of these experiences. For English language teachers working with second language learners, it is imperative to understand students' engagement responses in the context of their perezhivaniya, i.e., their personal interpretation of their language learning journeys. As articulated by Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), 'a teacher's awareness of students' ways of perceiving, processing and reacting to classroom interactions—their perezhivaniya—contributes significantly to the teacher's ability to engage the students in meaningful, engaging education' (p. 53). This statement underscores the vital role of language teachers in understanding their students' unique perspectives, experiences and responses. A poignant illustration of the importance of this awareness is evident in Mr. Sato's compassionate and supportive response to Yuki's disengagement (Perezhivanie Y1). This instance serves as a compelling reminder of how teacher sensitivity to students' perezhivaniya can have a profound impact on their learning experiences and engagement responses.

A limitation of the current study is that it relied basically on students' retrospective accounts to examine their perezhivaniya and engagement responses, despite attempts in complementing students' self-reports with classroom observation. The current results are limited in this regard and can only speak to students' self-report of lived experiences. Notwithstanding this, perezhivaniya are past events and the use of retrospective approach to data collection is essential (Veresov & Mok, 2018). When considering the findings, it is important to take into account, perhaps, what students did not say during the interviews. Never did Yuki elaborate on why her career goal was so important personally, nor did Sakura explain the significance of cultural exchange using English. Nevertheless, their perezhivaniya evolved around these significant personal factors. Further explorations on these personal factors would enhance our understanding of their perezhivaniya and engagement responses at both in-the-moment and beyond-the-moment stages. Furthermore, future research can include other types of students, especially those who are less motivated, as factors affecting their perezhivaniya and engagement responses should be different to the current cases, comprising of students who were keen to learn English.

## 8. Conclusion

In this study, the Vygotskian concept of perezhivanie provides a holistic perspective, highlighting that engagement in English learning cannot be fully understood if it is removed from the irreducible unit of perezhivanie where emotion and cognition are connected and influences derived from the person and context are weaved together (Roth & Jornet, 2017). As shown in this study, the concept of perezhivanie draws attention to the dynamic nature of language learning engagement, highlighting complex interplay between personal and social influences affecting students in-the-moment engagement responses as they experience language learning and their beyond the moment responses when they make sense of their learning experiences at a later stage. Thus, language learning



engagement is ongoing where students' lived experiences, their interpretation and reinterpretation of these significant experiences are crucial for understanding their engagement responses and their changes in engagement.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Clarence Ng:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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