

Moving Beyond the ‘Newcomer’ in University ESL Classrooms: A Working Paper

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Abstract

This working paper investigates students’ learning with regard to social participation as new community members in the ESL classroom context, as demonstrated in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice. To make sense of communities of practice, newcomers are required to accustom themselves to the meaning and appropriate use of different semiotic resources of the communities (Halliday, 1978; Mican, 2006). The participant as a newcomer attempts to understand the role of participation in the classroom community. People learn languages by interacting with others and making a community using real texts. The process of community building and participation is a natural process which people do every day, and these natural human activities influence students’ language learning.

Our research sets out to investigate how newcomers become experienced learners through interactions in an ESL classroom community at a Japanese university, and it documents students’ engagement in peer and classroom discussions. The inspiration for this research topic came from my own experiences of learning English and from a pilot study.

Learning English in Japan

Most Japanese university students first learnt English as a subject in both the primary and secondary school curricula. Traditional teaching methodologies were employed in English classes that were conducted by Japanese teachers rather than native English speakers. In lessons, students studied grammar, and practiced vocabulary drills and reading comprehension. They also read passages aloud from mainly non-authentic texts during one two-hour session per week, in order to prepare for university entrance examinations during the 1990’s. Currently, English language classroom texts incorporate elements of communicative language learning and tasked based learning. Some language teachers have become aware of the necessity of using authentic texts. Therefore, these language teachers combine traditional and communicative teaching methodologies. However, some English teachers strongly believe that grammar driven translations increase learners’ ability to express meaning.

Getting a good mark in the entrance examination is considered an essential social norm in Japan. Therefore, the curriculum and lesson plans for English teaching are designed to enable schools students to achieve high scores in the university entrance examinations. However, learning English for communication and socialization is not considered important. In lessons, mutual interactions between the teacher and students were not encouraged. Lessons consisted, instead, of one-way interaction from the teacher to the students in a hierarchical learning system.

My first experience of learning English for communication and socialization was during tertiary education. The teaching methodology employed involved an audio-lingual and communicative approach by using authentic teaching materials. A large numbers of authentic language learning materials which were not only spoken texts but also written texts such as procedural, recount, narrative and descriptive genre typed texts were introduced in the classroom. Most of the lessons were designed to improve students' English proficiency rather than to enable them to learn a particular subject such as engineering, literature, or medicine in English. I was provided with opportunities to practice my target language both in-and-out of class.

One of the essential English language learning experiences of my life was during my time as a resident assistant at a Japanese university. In this role, I helped international students to adapt to Japanese society and to their new learning community. It was my first experience of living with approximately thirty international students from different cultural backgrounds, with perceptions and prior knowledge completely different to my own. When trying to help newcomers integrate I faced conflict, resistance, and rejection from those who felt resistance towards intercultural adaptation. These experiences helped me realize that interacting with other members in a community may be essential for newcomers to gain an understanding of the community.

Learning English in an Australian university

When I move into a new environment, I was exposed to new experiences and new texts using my prior experiences and knowledge primarily to facilitate adaptation into the new community. However, using prior experiences and knowledge has frequently interfered with my adaptation, which eventually seems to happen naturally.

I attended an Australian university where I was studying Applied Linguistics. This was the first time I learnt a subject in English. As a newcomer to this classroom community, I felt like an outsider and it was a challenge to achieve a sense of belonging, especially in during classroom, group, and peer discussions. A lack of knowledge of the subject area coupled with my level of English proficiency affected my participation in verbal interactions during discussions.

I had little choice but to become an active listener in order to understand what was going on in the classroom. At the beginning of the semester, I struggled with verbal participation until other members of the classroom community accepted me. My feelings of being a newcomer have gradually changed through having weekly informal study group sessions with colleagues, and collaborating with classmates who commenced Applied Linguistics one semester earlier than me, as well as contact with PhD candidates. This personal experience motivated me to explore the process by which newcomers become experienced learners in a community by being exposed to a variety of different processes.

These above learning experiences motivated me to conduct research among Japanese university students, especially those who just arrived into a new learning and teaching environment from their high schools.

Background to the current study

Socio-cultural views have been applied to the field of research into language learning. The investigation in this study is based on the socialization theory of language learning. The concept of communities of practice, introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), emphasizes that learning occurs through the participation of members within a community. In this case study, I explore how my subject becomes an experienced student in the core group by describing features of her learning in a specific learning community.

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that newcomers should move from peripheral participation to become full members in a community of practice. In the classroom setting, students engage in different levels of participation: core, active, and peripheral. Movement from one level to another might take a long time; therefore students' improvement may occur gradually (Lave & Wenger). The reason for this is that movement to full participation is dependent on the social dynamic and the power structure within the community. Lave and Wenger believe that learning occurs within a traditional master-apprentice structure in communities of practice, and the present study aims to replicate this structure within an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom environment in an Australian university's English Language Centre. This study examines learners' spoken texts, which perform social functions and enable learners to observe language in action as authentic texts.

Hypothesis

As mentioned above, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that students engage in different levels of participation in a community. For example, some people attend events and meetings and participate in verbal discussion enthusiastically. These people are referred to as *core members*. Some people in the community attend meetings and forums occasionally and engage

in less verbal participation during discussions. This group is categorized as *active members* in a community of practice. Finally, some people listen to the speaker and express their understanding by nodding. They are referred to as *legitimate peripheral participants*. I propose that the concept of *core*, *active*, and *peripheral* can be applied to the English learning classroom community in order to demonstrate how newcomers become experienced learners through interactions with other members. One of the challenges in this study is to identify how the concept of the community of practice is embedded in the English language learning classroom environment.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) belief that newcomers can take a long time to become experienced learners leads me to hypothesize that newcomers need to move through a long term stage-by-stage process. I have identified these stages from my own personal learning experiences as a newcomer. The stages are as follows:

Stage 1: Newcomers decide they want to be part of the community.

Stage 2: They work with long-time members of the group and discover new learning strategies from experimenting with the group's regular learning strategies.

Stage 3: Newcomers become aware of new members in the community and realize they themselves are no longer new and proceed to help new members to participate.

In regard to the master-apprentice structure, Lave and Wenger (1991) state that a master does not teach all knowledge and abilities newcomers and learners require in order to survive in a community. This implies that newcomers may also learn skills through interaction with peers to use authentic spoken and written texts in the classroom. It means there are some students with more experience and others with less and they all participate together in order to complete a task. In order to understand how less experienced learners gain experience, it is necessary to analyze their interaction with core and active members.

Peripheral, active, and core groups

People's participation in a community falls into one of three groups: peripheral, active, or core (Wenger, 2002). For further clarification refer to Figure 1. If some members engage in a discussion or a debate and take on community projects, Wenger (2002) says they are the 'core' group, or 'the heart of the community'. These people assume the roles of leaders and coordinators. According to Wenger et al. (2002), participants in a core group frequently engage in verbal participation.

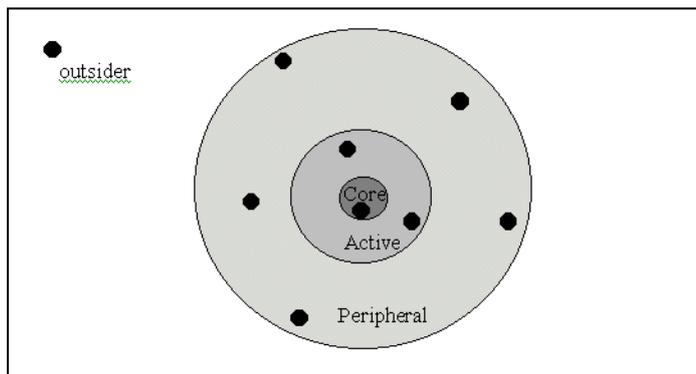


Figure 1: Wenger's degree of community participation
(adapted from Wenger et al., 2002, p. 57).

Core participants have superior knowledge and understanding compared to other participants. This is because they have had many opportunities to work in different contexts and situations in the community. According to Wenger et al. (2002), this group is usually small, involving only 10 to 15 percent of the community.

The next level is the active group. These members attend communal activities and events such as regular weekly meetings and participate occasionally in community forums. However, they participate in discussions less often than the core group. Like the core group, the active group is also quite small, around 15 to 20 percent of the community (Wenger et al., 2002). The participants in this group attempt to become core group members. However, they have not as yet achieved their full potential.

The third level is the peripheral group (Wenger et al., 2002). Peripheral participants keep to the sidelines, watching interactions between core and active members instead of participating in the discussions. These learners are often quiet and in some cases do not respond. Teachers often misunderstand this. They take it as a signal that these members are not learning. However, this may not be the case. These members gain their own insights from the discussion by taking notes and making connections in their own authentic texts. A learner at this level is also learning a lot, just like students who are at the core and active levels. When learners engage in social practices which Wenger (1998) calls "legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)" (p.11) in a community of practice, learning successfully occurs (Guzdial & Tew, 2006). Newcomers are peripheral participants who are not central or core but on the margins or edge of the activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991), who learn and acquire knowledge with authentic texts through their association with members in the community.

According to Lave & Wenger (1991) participation is the key to a community of practice. In order to become important members by understanding texts, newcomers on the periphery

need to be accepted by the other members. They can become central members of the community after they feel welcomed by others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Furthermore, learners at the peripheral level can learn and create knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, peripheral participation is a crucial role in the community.

Newcomers and experienced learners

Newcomers are expected to acquire the skills, knowledge, and habits necessary to participate in a community. Lave and Wenger (1991) have described how newcomers become experienced learners. However, it can be developed further.

Newcomers start by taking a legitimate peripheral role in specific activities. Ideally, newcomers move from a marginal to a central position through support from both a master and experienced learners. In the classroom setting, a teacher is considered to be a *master* with the most knowledge and most experience in the field. The master does not generally teach all the knowledge that newcomers require in order to engage in the core group. For example, a teacher may provide students with a task sheet explaining the requirements of an oral presentation. However, the teacher would not explain how to find information and which information is related to the topic of the presentation.

Newcomers need to acquire knowledge and skills to move towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of the community (Wenger, 2002). In the classroom, students, including those taking my subject, are expected to be competent in certain academic tasks such as discussions and oral presentations. In these activities, students are required to know not only certain grammatical rules, but also rules of participation such as turn-taking and how to produce socially acceptable utterances from model spoken and written texts. In order to become competent, the students need to participate in various activities with classmates and other individuals.

Social practices, in other words authentic texts, are crucial tools for learners to become community members. For example, they need to understand the strategies for conducting a conversation including:

- turn taking
- prediction
- understanding
- problem solving
- documentation
- mapping knowledge
- identifying gaps
- asking for help

- requesting information
- seeking know-how (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

To engage in appropriate social practices and employ the correct language is challenging for newcomers because most of these practices and activities are new to them and unlike anything they have previously experienced. Therefore, to make sense of social practices within their new community, learners and newcomers must become familiar with the meaning and appropriate use of different semiotic resources such as the activities just mentioned (Halliday, 1978; Mican, 2006).

Wenger (1998) explains that participation requires mutual recognition between those with equal and unequal status. Learners and newcomers may find it difficult to become competent participants unless they are given help. In a classroom situation, teachers and experienced students can help them become aware of and eventually grasp communal norms. With help and guidance they eventually become experienced learners. According to Hall (2002),

“[t]he purpose of overt instruction is to provide opportunities for learners to focus on, practice and eventually take control of the various linguistic and other relevant conventions needed for competent engagement in their communicative activities” (p. 119).

Current study

Our current research examines the extent to which students take part in different levels of participation during peer discussions using Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice as a framework. It will also determine the demands placed on participants in these encounters, and explore how they meet those demands.

Through our case study, we can demonstrate how:

- The concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is embedded in the English language learning classroom
- Newcomers engage in social practices to become experienced learners in a community.

The objectives of our study is as follows:

- To investigate the role of a participant in terms of core, active, and peripheral participation in different social practices.
- To describe how peer interactions provide learning opportunities.

To achieve the aim and the objectives above, our study sets the following research questions:

- How do newcomers become experienced learners through interacting with classmates and teachers in pair/group/classroom discussions?
- How does student participation in discussions provide learning opportunities?
- What do participants need in order to contribute to specific tasks such as classroom discussion in a language learning classroom?

Limitations

While the length of this research will allow me to clarify the process of how newcomers become experienced learners, a longer period of observation would be required to identify how my subjects, as peripheral learners, becomes full members of the community. Newcomers should move from peripheral participation to become full members, though it could take a long time with movement occurring gradually (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this study the focus is on features of the subjects' learning and on observations, which indicate that they had moved beyond the role of newcomers in the classroom. People such as teachers, peers, and native speakers in the community help the learners by providing scaffolding, consisting of multiple forms of assistance to achieve proficiency in the culture and the language (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Through interaction with others the learners can be gradually encouraged to help newcomers become more proficient in the language and the culture. Therefore, teachers and experienced learners in a community may have essential roles to provide opportunities for newcomers, and expose them to a variety of authentic texts and social practices in the process.

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