

# How can newcomers become experienced learners through interactions in classroom communities?

Akiko Nagao  
Kagawa University



## Reference data:

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The aim of this study is to examine the academic practices and language learning of a Japanese University student while he is exposed to a variety of social practices as a newcomer. How he attempts to understand the role of participation in the classroom community is investigated through register analysis and semantic analysis along with rhetorical activities from his interactions. In general, people in a community exhibit social practices and literacy activities and new community members develop those through participating in relationships with others (Wenger, 1998; Mickan, 2006). To make sense of communities of practice, newcomers are required to accustom themselves to the meaning and appropriate use of the different semiotic resources of the communities which they want to join (Halliday, 1978; Mickan, 2006). Newcomers learning to understand how to use different types of semiotic resources underlies the process of becoming a members of a community, and using a case study, this process is investigated here.

この研究は、言語学習者が新しい言語教育環境に足を踏み入れ、クラスメートとコミュニケーションをとり言語学習する時、その学習者がどのようにして自身の言語能力を伸ばしていくのかについての追跡調査を実施した。日本人大学生である被験者がどのように学習集団のメンバー達とかかわり合い、言語能力を伸ばしていくかを理解するために、被験者の対話をレジスター分析と意味解析を通して明らかにした。集団で生活する事で、その集団メンバーとの間で技巧と知識の修得が可能になる環境を実践共同体(communities of practice) と言い、その環境の中でコミュニティーメンバー達は社会的実践 (social practice) やリテラシー活動を行いながら成長を続ける(Wenger, 1998; Mickan, 2006)。所属する実践共同体のメンバーとなり貢献する為に、新メンバー達は所属する実践共同体にふさわしい多様の記号論的資源 (semiotic resources) を自分達のものにして、社会活動に参加する必要があるのだ (Halliday, 1978; Mickan, 2006)。上記の理論をもとに、新コミュニティーメンバーが英語学習実践共同体内での経験豊かな学習者に移行する過程を記述したのが今回のケーススタディーである。

**T**HIS RESEARCH investigates how a newcomer becomes an experienced learner through interactions with other group members in an Applied Linguistics classroom community through documenting student engagement in peer and classroom discussions using a sociocultural lens. In particular, two fundamental ideas of socialization theory of language learning form the basis of this investigation. Firstly, people in communities develop social practices and literacy activities through participation in relationships with others (Wenger, 1998; Mickan, 2006). Secondly, to make sense of communities of social practice, newcomers are required to accustom themselves to the meaning and appropriate use of different semiotic community resources (Halliday, 1978; Mickan, 2006). Thus this study discusses how a Japanese university student develops relationships and accesses community resources in pursuing spoken language proficiency in English.

## Research questions

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that students engage in different levels of participation in a community. For example, some attend events and meetings and participate in verbal discussion enthusiastically and are referred to as *core members*. Some attend meetings and forums occasionally and engage in less verbal participation during discussions and are categorized as *active members* in their community of practice. Finally, some attend meetings only on occasion, listen, but don't participate verbally and 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 class members. One of the challenges in this study is to identify how the concept of community of practice is embedded in the English language learning classroom environment.

This research examines the extent to which a student took 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.

The present study sets the following research questions:

1. How do newcomers become experienced learners through interacting with classmates and teachers in pair/group/classroom discussions?
2. How does student participation in discussions provide learning opportunities?

## Literature review

### *Peripheral, active, and core members*

Participation is essential not only for learning, but also for the development of the community. The degree of participation in a

community falls into one of three groups; peripheral, active, and 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 core members who assume the roles of leaders and coordinators. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), participants in the core frequently engage in verbal participation.

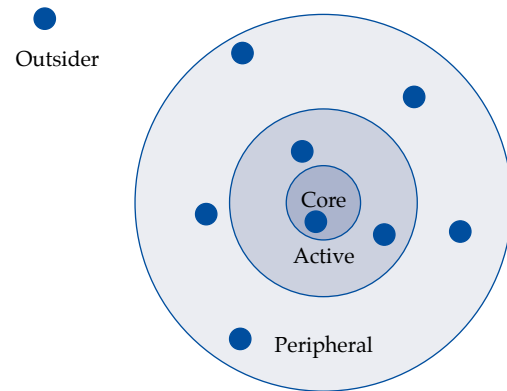


Figure 1. Wenger's degrees of community participation (adapted from Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 57)

Core participants have superior knowledge and understanding compared to other participants because they have had opportunities to work in different contexts and situations in the community. The next level out is the active members, who attend communal activities and events such as regular meetings and occasionally participate in community forums. However, they participate in discussions less often than the core group. The third level includes peripheral members (Wenger, et al.,

2002), who keep to the sidelines, watching interactions between core and active members instead of participating in discussions. When learners engage in social practices, which Wenger (1998) calls “legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)” (p.11) in a community of practice, learning 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 through their association with members in the community.

### *Newcomers and Experienced learners*

Newcomers are learners who just came to the field or the community for the first time. To become community members, newcomers must observe models of the accepted community discourse and receive scaffolding and coaching from more experienced members. In the classroom this could mean more experienced or proficient students assisting less experienced or proficient students. This mentoring is necessary because to make sense of communities of social practice, newcomers are required to acclimate to shared meaning within their new community and learn to appropriately use the different semiotic resources of their new communities (Halliday, 1978; Mican, 2006). Through the modeling and scaffolding from experienced community members, newcomers can gradually achieve full participation in their new community.

On the other hand, experienced learners often have more and better knowledge, as well as understanding which is not openly expressed in the community. This is because these experienced learners have had many opportunities to work in different contexts and situations in the community. They are in familiar territory in which they can handle themselves competently and where they know how to engage with others (Wenger, 1998).

## **Methodology**

### *Data information: The Participant*

The participant (J1) has recently started his academic studies for the Master of Arts degree in Applied Linguistics at a University in Australia. J1's education background in Japan includes studying international business through English. According to an interview with him, J1's class performances and learning styles were passive (Personal Communication, 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007). This is perhaps because Japanese social pressures dictated his learning style, as students in Japan are generally required to listen and take notes during lectures. Therefore, becoming an active learner is a challenge for him. While J1 may have sufficient English proficiency from past experience, he is new to Applied Linguistics as an academic study. Therefore J1 as a newcomer to the field is discovering the hidden agendas and learning the rules of community participation that shape his involvement.

### *Data collection*

J1's interactions with peers and lecturers were observed and recorded in academic lectures and study meetings. In the study meetings four or five university students gather once a week to review what they learned at lectures and tutorials and to expand their knowledge, especially regarding systemic functional grammar analysis by discussing the book *Using Functional Grammar: An explorer's guide* (Butt, Fagey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2000). The observation took place over four months. The researcher also participated in the same group discussions, lectures, and study meetings as J1 to better understand his contribution and participation. Three different discussions in which J1 took part were chosen and transcribed for analysis here. Interviews with J1 were conducted three different times, at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester in which data was collected. Field notes were taken during the observations and interviews. The

participants' learning behaviors, social purposes, and interaction patterns were focused on in the field notes.

## Data analysis and discussion

J1's interviews were analyzed to understand how he, as a newcomer, became an experienced student through community participation. The different stages of interviews show J1's awareness of his improvements from a newcomer to an experienced learner. Register analysis in particular offers a means of assessing J1's progress.

## Self-reflection

One question concerned whether J1 as a newcomer would start to feel experienced through interacting with peers in group discussions. To answer this question, J1 was asked to complete the same questionnaire at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. The questions were:

1. In what situations do you feel that you are a member of the community of applied linguistics?
2. In what situations do you feel that you are not yet a full member of the community of applied linguistics?
3. In what way and to what degree do you think you participated in the group/class discussion?

In the first interview, J1 confessed it was difficult to interact and participate spontaneously with peers during group and pair discussions. This made him feel like an outsider to the community. According to J1's self-analysis, his three different shortcomings included insufficient listening ability, inadequate semiotic resources such as technical terms, and a lack of confidence in his speaking ability, and these may have negatively impacted his participation.

The second questionnaire was conducted in the middle of the semester. J1's evaluation shifted from feeling like a newcomer to feeling like a member of the community. Particular experiences made J1 feel more a member of the community. For example, J1 managed to discuss with the lecturer in front of his peers in the classroom and to ask questions to other peers spontaneously. J1 attributed this success to being able to better understand spoken explanations, both from the lecturer and from peers. I feel that J1's expansion of semiotic resources such as technical words helped his understanding and facilitated his ability to interact during classes.

During the final interview, J1 showed strong confidence in being a community member. When J1 managed to discuss specific topics of Applied Linguistics with lecturers as well as disagree or agree and explain his opinion with more experienced community members in study meetings, he felt himself to be a more complete member of the community. One of J1's current challenges is to ask questions of PhD students at semi-formal presentations. In J1's opinion, if he could overcome this challenge, he could become a full member of the community. Other aspects of J1's improvement include his participation in peer scaffolding.

J1 emphasized the importance of repetition of interactions with more experienced members of the community in order to become a member. This is because J1 was aware that all interactions with more experienced community members amount to scaffolding. The other way J1 enjoyed scaffolding through his participation was by utilizing the opportunities to think logically and analytically through interactions. Thus, the mutual assistance and interactions between newcomers' and the experienced learners' is essential in order to co-create the community.

In summary, J1 is aware of his changes towards becoming an experienced student through interactions with peers in his community (Table 1). A register analysis of conversations with J1 is explored in the next section.



Table 1. Summary of interviews with J1

Questions	Interview 1 (8 <sup>th</sup> August 2007: Week 3)	Interview 2 (12 <sup>th</sup> September 2007: week 8)	Interview 3 (25 <sup>th</sup> November 2007: week 13)
<b>1. In what situation do you feel that you are a member of the community of Applied Linguistics?</b>	J1 does not feel he is a member at all.	When J1 managed to ask questions to lecturers in class.	When J1 could discuss with his peers about specific topics related to functional grammar.
<b>2. In what situations do you feel that you are not yet a full member of the community of Applied Linguistics?</b>	When J1 could not participate in general discussions.	J1 could not participate in discussions at formal presentations.	When J1 could not manage to ask questions to authorities.
<b>3. In what way and to what degree do you think you participated in the group/class discussion?</b>	By minimal responses and using minor clauses.	Spontaneously asking questions to more experienced community members.	Asking questions using technical terms and expressing his opinion

### Register analysis of J1's conversations

Here an analysis of three different texts from three different periods (see Table 2) will be presented. In the first section, the field, tenor, and mode of each text are analyzed to briefly overview the three different texts. The second part of this section is divided into two parts. Firstly, the analysis of J1's use of language features is focused on, including 1) specialist terminology, 2) complete clauses and incomplete clauses, 3) language choice of dis/agreement, 4) interrogative clauses, and 5) progressive and punctuative messages. These are examined to understand J1's development from a newcomer to an experienced learner.

### Field, tenor, and mode

The conversation in each text was collected during the fall 2007 semester (see Table 2). All of J1's interactions with peers and lecturers were transcribed, and the field, tenor, and mode of each text were analyzed as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of field, tenor, &amp; mode: Text 1, 2 &amp; 3

	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
<b>Data</b>	Week 4, 16 August 2007	Week 5, 24 August 2007	Week 10, 5 October 2007
<b>Field</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a lecture</li> <li>• Pair informal discussion</li> <li>• Analyzing transcripts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a study meeting</li> <li>• Group Informal discussion</li> <li>• Review of a book</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a study meeting</li> <li>• Group Informal discussion</li> <li>• Functional grammar analysis</li> </ul>
<b>Tenor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal</li> <li>• Social distance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal</li> <li>• Less social distance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal</li> <li>• Less social distance</li> </ul>
<b>Mode</b>	• Spoken	• Spoken	• Spoken

### Field

In Text 1, J1 had an informal discussion with a native English speaker analyzing spoken texts. The conversation took approximately 40 minutes. In Texts 2 and 3, J1 had an informal discus-

sion with his classmates. The discussion involves exchanges with multiple non-native English speakers for approximately 2 hours. J1 contributed to the conversation in multiple ways such as by asking questions, reading a book, and predicting further conversations.

### Tenor

In Text 1, the relationship with J1 and his partner had social distance. J1's role during interactions was mostly that of a passive listener, while his partner is authoritative in changing topics and assigning speaking turns. On the other hand, in Text 2 and 3, J1 had an equal relationship and less social distance with the others. This is because the members of the group discussion are his classmates, some of whom have close relationships with J1 outside of the formal academic setting.

### Mode

All the texts are spoken texts, and their lexical density reflects this. In Text 1, an informal conversation about transcript analysis was conducted between J1 and a native English speaker. Their social relationship had some distance due to age and gender differences and thus a large number of formalities were used. In Text 2, J1 and some international students whose first languages were not English had an informal group discussion about book reviews. In Text 3, the same members of the study meeting in Text 2 had another informal discussion with less social distance. Lexical densities are 46% in Text 1, 42 % in Text 2, and 40% in Text 3.

## J1's use of language features

### Specialist terminology

Through repetition of peer interactions, J1 may have become accustomed to listening and using new technical terms such

as *genre*, *mood block*, and *functional grammar*. As Table 3 shows, only one technical term from applied linguistics was used by J1 during his discussion at the beginning of the semester (Text 1). On the other hand, in Texts 2 and 3, a large number of technical words such as *genre*, *whole language*, and *nominalizations* are found. This result may indicate J1's capacity to use different semiotic resources increased, which enhanced J1's contributions to discussions. J1's feeling that he is becoming a member of the community may partially be reflected in increases in the number of technical terms he uses.

**Table 3. Summary of the number of technical terms in Texts 1, 2, and 3**

	Text 1 (week 4)	Text 2 (week 5)	Text 3 (week 8)
<b>Number of technical terms</b>	1	16	19
<b>Examples of technical terms used [# = turn]</b>	Transcript [ 2]	Genre [55], functional grammar [78], end product [309], whole language [668]	mood block [7], finite [392], polarity [641], nominalization [794], functional grammar [677]

### Complete clauses and incomplete clauses

One of J1's biggest improvements is that he makes longer complete sentences. As Table 4 shows, early in the semester about half of his utterances are incomplete sentences. On the other hand, J1's utterances in Text 3 tend to have a full range of lexical-grammatical choices as completed clauses, while the number of incomplete clauses decreased. This implies J1 may be shifting toward becoming a more central member of the community.



Table 4. Complete and incomplete clauses

Mode (clause type)	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Total no. of clauses	23	39	50
Incomplete clauses	12	8	8

### *The language choice of dis/agreement expression*

An additional aspect of J1's language choice, which expands as his studies progress, regards how he agrees with his interlocutors. In Text 1 J1 tends to agree by using minimal responses such as "yeah," "hmm," and "okay" rather than using complete clauses. On the other hand, J1 chooses different vocabulary in order to show his agreements in Text 3 (see Example 1). J1 shows his opinion clearly and explains functional grammar analysis more thoroughly, supporting his opinions with evidence.

#### **Example 1. Agreement and disagreement**

From Text 1:

Turn interactant

21. S1 would you want me to read it?  
 22. J1 **yeah yeah** (J1's agreement)

From Text 3:

Turn interactant

681. S3 you can't teach this to students they are only less experience  
 682. S4 possible I think  
 683. J1 **but I think** (J1's disagreement: rebuttal)  
 684. S3 if if if university teacher teach you tenor, mode

685. J1 **but we are learning English**

686. J1 **that's why its little bit difficult for students to use** (J1's explanation)

### *Interrogative clauses*

Another aspect of J1's speech which changed is that the number of *wh*-interrogative and other interrogative sentences increased (see Table 5). This indicates J1 has begun to ask more questions in his interactions. One interpretation of this data is that if J1 could not understand what the speakers said, he could not ask questions during discussions; thus, J1's understanding, listening, and comprehension abilities may have increased over the semester. According to J1, reflective thinking, for example his linking of theories from lectures and study meetings with his teaching experiences and future teaching opportunities, motivated him to ask questions.

Table 5. *Wh*-interrogative and other interrogative questions

Mode (clause type)		Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
<b>Wh- interrogative</b>	Full	4	2	13
	Elliptical	1	0	1
<b>interrogative</b>	Full	0	2	5
	Elliptical	0	1	0

### *An examination of progressive and punctuative messages*

My hypothesis was that the analysis of progressive and punctuative messages is a relevant criterion for assessing language improvement. To evaluate this, all of J1's utterances during discussions such as questions and responses were divided into two different messages, progressive and punctuative. "Progressive



sive messages include a completed clause which can expand, furthering conversation and demonstrating access to the full range of lexical-grammatical choices" (Wake, 2006, p. 146). Punctuative messages are typically minor clauses, including minor formulaic clauses such as minimal feedback that don't serve to further the discussion (Wake, 2006). In Text 3, J1 and his classmates were discussing one topic which was the human rights for heterosexual and homosexual couples (see Example 2). The majority of J1's utterances included the full range of lexical grammar such as line 237 and 240 and helped to expand the group conversations further.

#### Example 2. Progressive and punctuative messages

From Text 3:

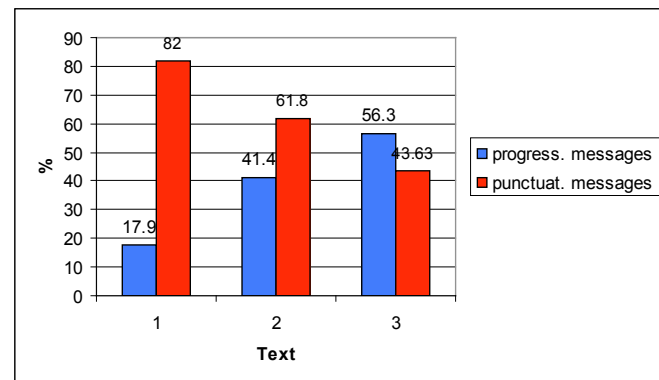
228. J1 the gay couple has also human rights [Progressive]  
 229. S9 where is the human rights ...human right for gay  
 230. J1 I think so [Progressive]  
 231. S3 but the parents  
 232. S6 it is not good for child  
 233. T control control  
 234. S8 it is not good for child if they cannot grow up with two mother and two father  
 235. J1 what do you [Punctuative]  
 236. S2 when I  
 237. MAY BE may be the gay couples really want to have the baby and finally they could so everybody can accept the situation [Progressive]  
 238. S9 yeah  
 240. J1 so..... so I I think the gay couple should have the opportunity to have the baby [Progressive]  
 241. S1 what if they did not accept them

242. S3 sorry sorry do you do with that A::: everything everybody should be in balance  
 243. maybe [Punctuative]  
 244. S3 why they male female  
 245. yeah [Punctuative]

The results from comparing J1's progressive and punctuative messages are shown below in Table 6 and Figure 2.

**Table 6. J1's progressive and punctuative messages for each text**

Text	Total turns (messages)	%	Progressive messages	%	Punctuative messages	%
1	189	40.04	34	17.9	155	82.0
2	152	19.17	63	41.4	94	61.8
3	165	20.97	93	56.3	72	43.63



**Figure 2. Summary of progressive and punctuative messages**





The results (see Figure 2) show the differences in contribution to the discussion in each text. In Text 1, 77.8% of the messages were punctuative and only 23% were progressive, thus J1 contributed to the discussion, but the majority of his messages consisted only of minor clauses with minimal feedback limited to formulaic expressions. Therefore the majority of J1's messages did not have the function of expanding and furthering the conversation. According to J1, he could not understand what his partners asked him, and he therefore mainly responded using minimal feedback in order to maintain the conversation. On the other hand, J1's contribution in Text 3 shows his vocabulary range and complexity had dramatically increased. The number of punctuative messages decreased to 43.6%, while progressive messages increased to 56.3%. In other words, J1's began to express himself using complete clauses. His language choice began to include a full range of lexical-grammatical features which were productive in furthering the discussion (Wake, 2006).

In summary, J1's language choice in his messages changed from short messages with minimal feedback to longer messages which expanded and furthered the conversation. This improvement shows J1 changed toward becoming a member of the community from his start as a newcomer.

## Conclusion

The process of participating in and building a community is a natural process in which people take part every day. The concept of communities of practice is not limited to English learning as can be seen by Lave and Wenger's (1991) research into alcoholic rehabilitation and midwife training groups. The fundamental idea of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice can be embedded into language learning as well.

People in the community negotiate, interact, and work together towards the same goal. In language classrooms, learn-

ers participate at different levels. Newcomers as peripheral participants are less skilled than experienced learners. In order to become experienced learners, newcomers and peripheral participants are exposed to a variety of social practices by working with other members and sometimes individually. In this study, when J1 encountered new experiences, he explored suitable techniques to deal with the issues that arose. For example, he expressed a need to fill gaps between his prior experiences and the expectations of the classroom community. Through this research we have seen J1's experience of learning through peer discussion for the first time while studying in Australia. His prior learning experiences involved grammar translation with few opportunities for peer discussions and did not prepare him for turn-taking. Thus, he limited himself to listening to the other speakers at the start of his studies and gradually explored strategies to enable him to express himself, such as writing what he wanted to say on a piece of paper. He also discovered appropriate learning strategies through peer interaction. This process proved essential for J1 as a newcomer to engage in and to become an experienced learner, and future research may show its general importance to most learners. The more new experiences offered by the community, the more J1 could apply his knowledge and skills to different social practices. In other words, J1 as a newcomer steered his own course in becoming an experienced learner.

This research shows how J1 developed his English skills through interacting with other members of his classroom community. For second language learners such as J1, the learning process is located in a particular social context and thus involves joining the learning community culture (Oxford, 1997). This target culture and its language elements are influenced by people who interact with the learners in a community of second language learners, such as J1's teachers and peers. These teachers and peers in the community help newcomers such as J1 by scaffolding their contributions through multiple forms of assistance



to help them to achieve community membership, including the language and culture embedded in such membership (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Through interaction with others, and with time, it can be presumed J1 became able to help other newcomers become more proficient in the target language and culture.

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