

# **COP: An Investigation of Voices in the Classroom**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative case study investigated one non-native English-speaking student's experiences in an English-speaking classroom context. Under the conceptual framework of sociocultural theory, Communities of Practice (COP), a model developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), was applied in an attempt to give meaning to the thoughts and actions of the participant in this study as regards class participation – quantity and quality. The classroom itself was situated in a graduate program in Tokyo, which operated completely in English replete with a native speaker instructor and a combination of native and non-native speaking students. Data were collected through direct classroom observations, field notes, interviews, and peer review. Indeed, the communities that existed in the classroom, the participant's perceived membership in those communities, and the identities created as a result, ultimately guided the participation of a non-native speaker in an English-speaking learning context.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Many studies have investigated and reported on the plight of a growing population of overseas students who attend universities in North America. Attempts have been made to understand the issues that surround these students' success or failure in this new and often anxiety-laden context (Morita, 2004; Spack, 1997). Consistent with previous works, the context of this study is a North American university, but where it is unique is that the university is based in Tokyo, Japan. Thus, on an important social and educational issue, the 'competing' contexts of an English classroom operating in an Asian country offered a different angle from which to shine the light of sociocultural theory. As will be demonstrated in this paper, using the model of Communities of Practice (COP), a student's class

participation and indeed success or failure may be, to a large degree, a function of the nature of the communities that exist in the classroom. Furthermore, a student's status or membership in these communities, and the associated identity construction are also major considerations. This study uses the voice of a Japanese female non-native speaking (NNS) student to relate her experience and exposure to communities in the classroom.

## **LITERATURE/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical underpinning of this study follows learning as a social process i.e. social theory of learning. The legacy left by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist whose life was cut short by tuberculosis, believed that cognitive development or learning occurred through interaction and thus through activity; and completion of activities required co-participation and thought. Thought or thinking, according to Vygotskian theory, is closely associated with language. (Vygotsky, 1985) All of this required a shared culture, or in this paper's metaphor - community. Within the last twenty years, a coined neo-Vygotskian theory has emerged and is described as follows:

The essence of the neo-Vygotskian approach is to treat human learning and cognitive development as a process, which is culturally based, not just culturally influenced; as a process, which is social rather than individual; and as a communicative process, whereby knowledge is shared and understandings are constructed in culturally-formed settings. (Mercer, 1994)

Therefore, the unit of analysis under investigation becomes activities or events within a specific context, in this case – participation in the classroom of an English-based graduate program.

The primary theoretical framework for this study is Community of Practice (COP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, Wenger, 1999). In basic terms, COP posits that communities of practice are ubiquitous and that everyone is a part of a variety of COP's as they live their life. Involvement in every community that a person is a part of will vary from being a core member in one to being a member participating on the periphery in others. Then, what is a community? A community of practice defines itself along three dimensions: What it is about – its *joint enterprise*

as understood and continually renegotiated by its members. How it functions - *mutual engagement* that bind members together into a social entity. What capability it has produced – the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (Wenger, 1998). The classroom and the activities are the joint enterprise of the members; the completion of these activities is the mutual engagement that binds them; and the shared repertoire is the language, practices, and construction of meaning that is formed as a result. This ultimately is what Lave and Wenger refer to as situated learning.

Thus, learning is socially negotiated and learning involves the whole person as it relates to activities in communities. Another component of COP is when a newcomer enters the scene and interacts with ‘old-timers’, they initially remain on the outside or periphery gradually participating in the group’s frameworks and eventually becoming a full or core member. This is what Lave and Wenger refer to as Legitimate Periphery Participation (LPP).

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and... the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. “Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

The classroom in many cases will also have established communities and result in a meeting of newcomers and old-timers. These communities may be friendships or past relationships of other forms, but whatever the reason, LPP is relevant to the classroom and relevant to this study. Thus, COP’s, though distinct, are dynamic - they form, transform, and break apart.

What of the members of these communities? Are they static entities? Is their behavior consistent across context? As communities are constructed, identities of the members will also be constructed. For example, in order for an identity to be established, it has to be recognized by others. This means that much of what happens in the area of identity is done by others, not by oneself. (Blommaert, 2005)

In keeping with this idea, we are how we see ourselves in a given community and also how we are seen by others – identity is situated and therefore dynamic. A key component of membership in a community and the associated identity construction involves perceptions of competence. For the purposes of this study, competence is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and includes content, language and discourse competence.

Based on the presented theoretical framework, this study investigated the following research questions:

- What is the impact of community in the classroom on a student’s class participation?
- Is identity constructed based on membership to a specific community?
- Is competence a key component of identity construction?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to obtain an understanding of the learner’s classroom experiences and perspectives from their voice. As per the ideals of qualitative research, concrete illustrations provided by the participant are presented in order to identify general trends or patterns of thoughts and actions that would provide data relevant to the research questions posed. To achieve this, observations were made; field notes produced and interviews were conducted. In addition, peer feedback with another researcher involved in a separate study in the same context also occurred. This study documented participants’ thoughts, feelings, anxieties, achievements and transformations as it relates to the class participation and involvement in the various communities that existed in the classroom.

### **Context and Participants**

The context is a TESOL course in a graduate program in an American university based in Tokyo, Japan. The program operates exclusively in English and is a mix of native speakers from countries such as England, Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, and Australia, and non-native speakers mostly from Japan. To complete the

program, thirty credit hours of courses must be completed. As a result, in almost every class, there will be students who are context experienced, have some experience or are taking their first or second class. Due the nature and length of the program, it is rare, if not impossible, for students to go through the entire program and not have taken a class with someone they have not met before.

As regards the classroom investigated in this study, it is a required course of teaching methods. In fact, there is a Part I and Part II to this course though they are separate courses. Part II has very practical content as opposed to the more theoretically based Part I. This study occurred Part II, so many of the students in the class had taken Part I together; however, there were also new students, and therefore, first time meetings. The same instructor teaches both classes at this specific institution and is very experienced with the teaching context. He is bilingual and has a deep understanding of Japan, Japanese culture and Japanese people. The classroom atmosphere is incredibly positive and operates at light-speed. In short, everyone will work with everyone on a regular basis. What's more, this is a recurring process. It is a routine that the students know, expect and, in the opinion of the researcher, respect. As for the students in this study's context, there are 8 males (5 native speakers, 3 non-native Japanese speakers), and 4 females, who are all non-native and Japanese. The age range for the entire class is estimated to be from early 30's to early 50's.

The participant in this study is a non-native speaking (NNS) Japanese female - Anna. Anna has 10 years of teaching experience commencing with junior high school students, followed by three years teaching in an eikaiwa teaching adults where she continues to teach up to the time of this study. In addition to this teaching position, two years prior to the time of this study, Anna began teaching general English communication courses in a Tokyo university but gave up the position due to the extended commute it required. She then obtained an English language teaching position at foreign language institute in Tokyo where she has been for three years and teaches TOEFL. The year prior to this study, Anna began teaching at another university. She also teaches TOEIC and general English classes at an undisclosed institution. Anna's oral English skills are advanced (fluency, vocabulary, response time, grammatical accuracy); moreover, she also naturally applies native-like hand gestures. During context observations, she interjected appropriately when she wanted to jump into a conversation or exchange, she disagreed with group members' opinions, and was able to provide extended and well-received answers to

class discussion questions – solicited or unsolicited. Her usual seating location in class is with native speakers as opposed to sitting with the Japanese NNS females that sit together in a different location in the classroom. In Observation 1, Anna accounted for 32 of 103 student to teacher interactions - over 30%; in Observation 2, she accounted for 19 of 79 student to teacher interactions; and 12 of 59 student to teacher interactions in Observation 3. What's more, she participates equally (at the very least) in every small group situation regardless of group membership and apparently prepares well for each class.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected regarding student class participation with 3–3 hour observations and 1–1 hour observation initially as a passive observer. Of focus during the initial observation, was the number and length of teacher to student exchanges. This approach was selected due to the nature of class operation, which was a function of the class content or topic. However, some small group interaction patterns were also noted. In second, third and fourth observations, teacher-student exchanges were documented but inter-group exchanges moved to the forefront. During these observations, fieldnotes with brackets containing researcher initial thoughts, feelings, or future questions, were jotted down and then extended fieldnotes produced shortly thereafter. I believe that my observations provided valuable insights regarding the overall nature and interaction patterns in the class. One week after Observation 3, initial interviews were arranged and conducted over a 2-week span. There were two initial interviews per session (one week) lasting 20 minutes each and took place immediately prior to the class' operation. As such, four interviews were conducted over a two-week period, of which, two participants were selected to be primary participants with one participant being the focus of this paper. Initial interviews were recorded and transcribed with brackets that attempted to exhibit the moods of the moment, which ultimately sought to achieve a thick description. The data were reviewed and coded but lacked, in the opinion of the researcher, enough substantive information. Thus, during the fourth observation, a follow up set of interviews was arranged that intended to not only confirm or increase the trustworthiness of the original data, but also to probe more deeply into the participant's inner feelings. The follow up interviews were recorded, transcribed (with brackets), and analyzed. Finally, data was exchanged between me and

another researcher regarding overall class nature as well as for the participant who was common between us. This afforded us some degree of triangulation, thus adding to the credibility of the data obtained in this study.

## **Analysis**

As stated earlier, the design of this study intended to gain data from the participant's perspective. It also aimed to identify any general trends or noteworthy patterns. As such, this analysis took on an inductive approach. The transcripts were reviewed repeatedly and categories observed in the data identified, marked and labeled using non-professional terms. Later theoretical categories were then generated based on literature review and subsequent and relevant theory identification. Finally, hypotheses were generated regarding the participant and then recursively analyzed. This analysis was triangulated with data from another researcher in the same context as well as through general discussions surrounding our common participant.

## **Findings: Community, membership and identity**

Analysis strongly suggested that communities exist in the classroom as can be seen in the comments from – Anna. Clearly, COP is very relevant to this context.

Anna: Yeah, I understand...have the same thought before because as you know the Japanese students sit way to the right. I think there is...it's their territory and they had the same introductory course at the same time so I think they create some kind of community...

The question posed by the interviewer was along the lines of, 'Why do you sit where you sit, in the classroom?' The word 'community' was never used by the interviewer and as mentioned in Analysis; COP was uncovered in the literature after the interview was conducted. This brief excerpt from Anna is extremely rich in data. As can be clearly seen, Anna recognizes the communities that exist inside the classroom; she indeed uses 'community' in her choice of vocabulary because that is exactly how she views it. Perhaps more interesting are Anna's other word choices. Firstly, her comment '...the Japanese students sit way to the right,' is very

illuminating with regard her own identity construction because Anna herself is Japanese. Based on her words, the fact that she is Japanese but does not belong to that community exemplifies an identity construction which distances her from the community to which she is not a member. In addition, she uses the phrase 'their territory.' The word territory suggests that the community that the Japanese students have is something that they have ownership of in a sense, or something that is potentially guarded, protected or shielded from outsiders. This is also one indication that communities in the classroom can be likened to a double-edged sword – they can cut both ways. Thus, we see some evidence that communities in the classroom can also have a negative effect. In any event, we clearly see that communities not only exist in the classroom, but they are clearly visible.

The data also revealed evidence of Legitimate Periphery Participation – LPP. Anna chooses to remain on the periphery of this community, interestingly, and does not desire to move towards being a core member. Frankly speaking, a more thorough literature review is required to speak with confidence on this issue; however, it is clear that communities in the classroom may not necessarily be a positive element to all people at all times. This can further be seen in Anna commenting that, "I don't avoid joining the community but, in my view, they feel comfortable towards their company so I'd rather not."

Whether one wishes to remain on the periphery of a community or not, the community and the periphery do exist. Take for example Anna's actions when being required to join the community that she had commented on above. Anna accommodated to the norms of that community, unwillingly, in terms of switching to Japanese during the discussion thus taking on an identity different from the one she has in other communities.

Interviewer: Do you find you're different when you're working in different groups?

Anna: Yeah...I see the difference, yes.

Interviewer: How are you different?

Anna: Last week, for the second half of the class I was grouped with 2 Japanese female students [two-thirds of the community she has been commenting on], and



they ...I understand they feel more comfortable communicating in Japanese but one person starts Japanese, it's catching so I ... naturally I chose to communicate in Japanese yeah so...

Interviewer: Why?

Anna: Because I feel I had to accommodate with them because I speak Japanese too, but it's English class and a English media of course, so I prefer of course communicating in English...but sometimes I don't ... it depends, it depends on the situation, it depends on the grouping, it depends on my partners.

Interviewer: Yeah, so and you feel comfortable with the others [her proximal seating members i.e. where she is core member].

Anna: [Speaks over me] It's my own [unintelligible] surroundings.

Clearly we can see that Anna is on the periphery of this group. She sat in their territory (physical location in the classroom), so she accommodated to them. She further went on to say that 'sometimes I don't...it depends.' This could not be a more explicit expression of identity and membership being situated, being constructed depending on circumstance. Further investigation into the settings where Anna does not accommodate would certainly add to the knowledge of this discussion but based on her last statement, 'It's my own... surroundings.' it might be as simple as the others sitting on her side of the classroom.

### **Competence and identity**

Three components of competence surfaced in the data: content, language, and discourse. These three components are inter-related though content competence (content knowledge) seems to be the most influential, closely followed by (in some situations, not all) by language competence, and to a lesser degree (except with inexperienced NNS students) discourse competence. If we envision these three components on continuums, the pole ends of each could be labeled as 'inhibitor' and 'attractor'. For example, a high degree of content competence would be an attractor for a student's ability to participate in class or to their member status in a variety of

communities, while a low level of content competence would be an inhibitor of class participation and community member status. This principal would apply to all components of competence. There is one caveat to this conceptual model, and that is inhibitors can become attractors if there are other class members dealing with similar inhibitor components.

With Anna, broadly arched judgments of her language competence are not appropriate based on her performance in the methods class alone. In the methods class, given her high level of content competence, she is able to participate to a high level as her input is often based on her experience. Thus, her identity in this class is as an equal with anyone. She has the content competence, enough language ability to participate in any community to the degree she chooses, and is experienced in the way of academic discourse given that this is her fifth course in the program. Because of having sufficient levels of competence in all three components, she is very comfortable in the class. However, methods class is not the only class she is taking or has taken. The following are some excerpts from her interview that speak to the issue of the inter-relation of components of competence as expressed by the participant.

Anna: Methods II is more practical and Methods I is more theoretical and conceptual ...I can contribute to the class [Methods II] 'cause I [have been] teaching for a decade so in that sense, I find more room to participate or contribute to the class or classmates.

Interviewer: So if ...could you tell me why speaking about theory or concepts is more difficult for you?

Anna: Because I am the second language user of English, so I need to process the concept and language at the same time. So, [if] the concept is very familiar and the concept is familiar in my L1 to, I can concentrate on just the processing of the language because I have something in my mind already ...but talking about conceptual theoretical things, my workload is very heavy because the topics or contents is not familiar in my L1 either so its really hard or heavy load to understanding the concept and outputting in English at the same time, so maybe I feel less comfortable or I may feel its too demanding.

Here we see evidence that content knowledge is a major factor in being able to participate in class. Thus, in terms of member status in communities where there are NSs and/or those with a high level of content knowledge, Anna or anyone will be at a disadvantage if they have competence component pole at the inhibitor end of the continuum. As she stated in her interviews, her confidence can sway depending on the situation. Clearly, her identity will be constructed based on the context she is in, which is based on how she constructs an identity relative to her perceptions of her own competence. Comments of this nature were stated repeatedly by Anna during her two interviews. Finally, Anna also mentioned that she lacked in the knowledge of academic discourse patterns when she first began the graduate program.

I don't think I was... I wasn't ready for kind of participating [in] active discussions...but we're... everyone was our first courses we kind of felt awkward to pose questions ask question or challenge a theory... I didn't know how to how to raise question or how to pose question or how to interrupt professor, so maybe I felt a little awkward because I'm not sure whether I could stop the lecturer now or should I ask questions later in class, so I was not familiar with the styles of being a student of being a nice student in class ...

As can be seen from Anna's comments, the inter-relation of content, language and discourse competence all play a factor with her performance in the classroom, her identity, and ultimately member status in the communities in the classroom.

## **Discussion**

In this study, I have investigated one student's class participation from a Community of Practices (COP) perspective. Though a longitudinal examination of this participant's classroom participation was not directly observed, this study collected valuable and insightful data by having the participant recount their classroom experiences from their first course in this program right up until the time of the study. As a result, the picture of the participant's thoughts, feelings, anxieties, challenges, achievements, and transformations is vivid. Equally vivid is the relevance of COP to this context given the nature of the program that these participants are enrolled.

The data of this study also suggest that identity is situated or constructed. It

should be noted that a weakness of this study is the lack of literature review and understanding of identity itself. Future investigations similar to this study would be well advised to engage in a deep review and understanding of the theoretical frameworks of identity. Nonetheless, in this study, associated with communities and member status is the identity or identities that are constructed because of a student's perceptions of their own competence. Hence, if a student belongs to more than one community, depending on its dynamics, he or she may have a different identity contingent upon several competence components, which are also situated. These competence components: content, language, and discourse pattern familiarization are scaled on a continuum. The poles of this continuum are regarded as inhibitor and attractor and have a bearing on community member status. For example, in this study's context, if a student's content knowledge is high, this is an attractor and can result in rapid integration into a community. If a student's language proficiency is high, then this is also an attractor as they will be able to follow and participate in activities and discussions more so than a student with lower or low language proficiency that will likely remain on a communities' periphery for an extended time. Finally, and to a lesser degree relative to the previously mentioned components, a student's level of familiarity with academic discourse patterns will play a role in one's constructions of identity and community membership. If a student cannot negotiate the opportunity to add one's thoughts to a group discussion or is, in the words of the participants, 'awkward' to give and support their opinion, it will ultimately inhibit their membership in a community as they have little to offer, which in turn constructs an identity of inferiority to varying degrees.

Through an analysis of a learner's classroom participation, a deeper understanding was constructed regarding the reasons for their actions or inactions. Interestingly, this analysis showed that the learner could not be decontextualized – they were better understood from the perspective that 'who' they are is a function of where they are and with whom. Using observations and interviews, and looking at this issue from the COP perspective, the complexity of these relationships may have been brought to light even if only slightly.

## **Conclusion**

This study has implications for pedagogy at various levels in terms of taking

positive and reasonably informed steps to assist students in their journey through an English-based graduate TESOL program in Tokyo, Japan. Providing the required assistance for students is rooted in understanding who they are and the issues they grapple. Because of the design of the program in question, a COP perspective from which to try to know the students, particularly NNSs, appears quite appropriate. Central to this 'knowing' is an understanding that communities in the classroom will undoubtedly exist and play an important role in a learner's academic life. More importantly, the knowledge that communities can have both positive and negative impacts depending on a variety of factors external and internal to the student is a critical awareness. (Smith, 2003)

From a program administration level, having a product and process-oriented approach to the socialization or enculturation to the school would be beneficial. In other words, an introductory course, in addition to providing knowledge and preparation of academic written discourse patterns, could also highlight, sensitize, or prepare the learners to some degree as to what they can expect in the classroom in general. Perhaps former graduates or ongoing NNS students could address newcomers in any introductory course. A student mentorship program would be ideal though it is recognized that this may be difficult given the adult setting – jobs, family commitments and so on.

At the instructor level, attempting to know the students from a COP perspective may guide the design and operation of the class itself. An excellent exemplar to draw from would be the instructor and his classroom in this study. The initial security that members in communities feel to start the class is complemented by constant grouping and re-grouping of students shortly after. Thus, certain communities in the classroom will not become too strong and possibly inhibit newcomer induction, and at the same time, promote positive relationships and community membership with any combination of students. Clearly, the instructor, with an awareness of the issues highlighted in this study, could have a positive impact on the lives of the learners.

At the student level, even without program administration support, if students took it upon themselves to welcome new class members who are presently not part of a community in the classroom to expedite these new students as core members of a community, then the anxieties related to new beginnings in the classroom would be alleviated to a large degree. In effect, the positive aspect of communities in the classroom would be amplified and the negative aspects muted.

## **Final thoughts**

Initially, this study was approached from the post-positivist paradigm seeking to confirm that class participation was a function of consistent components with predictable outcomes. Initial thoughts were that language ability, topic knowledge, individual class preparation, personality, and class environment would all be factors for the level of a non-native speaker's interaction in an English language educational context. It is true that some of these factors play a major role, but more importantly, in an effort to understand these issues and 'answer' my research questions, a new research design emerged, which vaulted this study into the constructivist paradigm. By examining and re-examining my data, I was launched into a deeper search for how to categorize and define what had been found. This search led to Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice (COP), which lead to questions surrounding identity construction and competence. Now, instead of having found answers to the focus of my study, I am left with more questions. And, like the participants, as a researcher, I have engaged my own thoughts, feelings, anxieties, challenges, achievements and transformations in the completion of this study.

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