The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the development of a community of practice in a high-level ESOL classroom. The study investigated three characteristics of a community of practice: the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire. The foundational literature for this study was learning as participation in a community of practice. The setting for the study was an advanced ESOL classroom at a small community college. The participants were adult immigrants and refugees from ten countries.

Data sources consisted of semi-structured individual and group interviews, participant writing, classroom activities, and field and debriefing notes. Bilingual advisors reviewed interview questions. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Five themes emerged from the study:

(1) Students began the course with similar goals but no shared classroom practice.

(2) The evolution of a shared practice was characterized by confusion and discovery.
(3) Social and academic identities emerged in the interactions among students.

(4) Students expanded their focus from individual needs and solo performances to include relationships and interactions with others.

(5) Students shaped the communicative practices of the classroom.

Three major conclusions were drawn from this study. First, a community of practice did evolve for many students in the ESOL classroom, but not for all. The community of practice developed around the authentic use of language to negotiate a shared practice, to demonstrate identities of competence, and to shape the social, linguistic, and pedagogical activities of the classroom.

Second, just as communities can highlight the social and contextual nature of learning and development of identities of competence, communities can also be sites of conflict, disempowerment, and rigidity. Educators must examine how collaborative learning experiences might or might not be empowering for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Third, the development of community can be an important aid to meaningful instruction in adult literacy education and act to counter the current ‘test and teach’ emphasis that values individual knowledge over authentic practice.

INDEX WORDS:  Situated Learning, Community of Practice, Adult Literacy, ESOL, Identity
COLLABORATION AND COHESION: DEVELOPING COMMUNITY IN AN ADULT
ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (ESOL) CLASSROOM

by

MARGARET HERSRUD McLAUGHLIN
B.A., The University of Colorado, 1972
M.Ed., Lewis and Clark College, 1978

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in
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MARGARET HERSRUD MCLAUGHLIN

Major Professor: Thomas Valentine

Committee: Karen Watkins
John Schell
Ron Cervero
Talmadge Guy

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Classroom

It is cold and wet outside on this winter afternoon at West Coast College, and several students and I shake off the rain as we hurry into the classroom. Umbrellas are drying in the corner, and several backpacks lie on the table next to the door.

Tables and chairs fill the middle of the room, and some of the students are sitting two by two at them. I notice three women clustered near a table, speaking together in Japanese. When Saren, one of the Chinese students, joins them, they smile and switch to English. N.K. and Miguel, the only single students this quarter, are sitting at the front of the room drawing something on paper and talking about scuba diving. They greet me as I begin to take books and papers out of my briefcase.

The table I use, at the front of the room, is soon covered: first drafts of essays to hand back, overhead transparencies and handouts, practice sheets for review, and 15 copies of an in-class essay that one of the students wrote last week. The course textbook, an English dictionary, and two other resource books are there as well. And, of course, plenty of dry erase markers in a variety of colors.

Rosalinda comes up to explain why she’ll miss class next week, and we chat briefly about the long days she’s putting in doing tax returns for family and friends. When she sits down, it is in the same chair and at the same table she always sits at with Dyan. Saren has moved around the room and is talking with N.K. and Miguel, now; she finds a seat near them. Eleven people
are here as I call out, “Let’s get started, okay?” Fifteen minutes late, Cece arrives with a loud
“Hello.” Her enthusiasm is great, but I’m annoyed that she is late, again; I ignore her
interruption and continue talking. Right on her heels, Adel and his wife slip in and sit at the
back of the room. The door opens a third time, and Qui Qui enters quietly. The rain has slowed
her down because her metal crutches aren’t as stable when the sidewalks are wet. She had
childhood polio and struggles to be ambulatory, but the only accommodation she’s requested, a
special chair, is close to the door and easy to reach.

Reviewing last week’s practice takes about 30 minutes. I offer a brief explanation for
using a particular type of sentence, and ask for an example or two, but the room is quiet. N.K.
looks around and says, “I like fries, and I like hamburgers.” As I write it on the whiteboard, I
ask, “How do you know this is a comparison?” N.K. responds, and, having broken the ice, there
are more examples, some of them incorrect. I write those, too, on the whiteboard, and we
transform them into sentences that compare or contrast. When I ask if more practice will be
helpful, nearly everyone nods, so I ask everyone to think up one sentence with a partner, write it
on the whiteboard, and we’ll collaboratively correct each one.

In short order, sentences are up on the three whiteboards as students ask each other for
help or give out comments on the connecting words and punctuation: “How do you spell
‘through’?” “Is this sentence right?” “I think you forgot something. You need something
after the comma.” “Should this be past tense?”

Next, and as a whole group, we work around the room, reading sentences, commenting
on meaning, and pointing out what makes the sentences compound or simple, comparisons or
contrasts. Cece calls out one more example, to make sure she understands: “Filipina women
like to marry American Navy, but their life is not easy far from the family.” Several students
respond positively; she acknowledges them but looks to me for final approval.
I am introducing a new sentence skill when, suddenly, the overhead projector stops working. I fiddle with the controls for a few seconds and chew on my lip; immediately, people call out suggestions, and three or four of them come up to the front. “It’s broken.” “No, it was working before.” “It’s the light -- what is the name?” “Maybe broken for good.” “Men can fix this.” “Why men?” Miguel flexes his bicep, and everyone laughs. Cece reaches over and wiggles a switch; the light comes back on immediately, and the transparency is clear on the whiteboard. Now she flexes her arm muscles, and people laugh again. “Wow, Cece is -- what is that -- magician?” “Yeah, Cece works magic!”

I notice Mari looking at the wall clock as if to remind me that it’s break time, and we finish. Mari heads outside to smoke a cigarette, and N.K. goes after his usual bag of nachos and a can of soda. Kumi hands out her small and yummy chocolate chip cookies. They go quickly, as usual, and when she mentions a new recipe she wants to try out, several students enthusiastically encourage her.

Sitting with a small group, I listen as Dyan tells about her appointment to take the college placement test for admission to the LPN program. And then Vivian turns around in her chair and shows off her anniversary present, a pretty ring with diamonds and a ruby. She smiles as everyone makes a fuss over it.

Break time is nearly over as Qiu Qiu asks if it is common in the US for a male doctor to examine a woman without a nurse in the room. When she begins to point to her body as she struggles for words to explain that she’s talking about a gynecological exam, and Miguel and N.K. look away, I realize that I’m a little embarrassed to discuss this with her in front of them. I give her a brief answer and offer to talk more about it after class.

Everyone but Kateryna is back in the room as we continue the class.

Adel’s wife has given me permission to copy her essay from last week and hand it out to
everyone. As the students read it, a number of them make positive comments to her and later, during the group writing activity, Clara and Saren move to her table to work with her and Adel.

At the end of class, Erika approaches me about a recommendation for a part-time job, and Kumi asks about the writing assignment from last week. Kateryna returns at that moment, apologizes for missing class time, and explains that she just arranged for practice time on the Music department’s piano. It’s still raining as the four of us walk across campus toward my office and the student parking lot.

**Background of the Study**

As a teacher of adult ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) students at a small community college in the Pacific Northwest, I find the classroom dynamics in my writing and speaking courses both fascinating and complicated. As any of us who has worked in this field knows, the ESOL classroom presents opportunities and challenges not seen in other educational settings.

During the 1990s, a record number of new foreign immigrants (13.7 million) came to the United States (ETS Center for Global Assessment, 2004). ESOL programs have grown as a result, and more than a million immigrant adults and refugees are now enrolled in state-administered ESOL classes that are funded, in part, by the federal government (OVAE, 2006). In some states, enrollment in ESOL classes now surpasses enrollment in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) classes (OVAE, 2006; Gillespie, 2001). Nationwide, approximately 90% of these adult education programs are located in and supported by community colleges and technical schools (CAAL, 2004).

At West Coast College (a pseudonym), a two-year community college located in the Pacific Northwest, immigrants and refugees from more than 20 countries enroll in a typical
quarter. Because of the area’s proximity to Pacific Rim countries, the largest student representation is from countries such as the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and China. There are also immigrants and refugees from Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Spain, Kosovo), the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Israel), and South America (Colombia, Brazil). Since 2003, recently arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America (Guatemala, Honduras) are enrolling and persisting at higher rates than ever before (Report of Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, 2004).

Student demographics in the ESOL program at West Coast College vary considerably. Because it is close to U.S. Naval operations, for example, a significant number of students are military dependents living on or near one of the nearby bases. Because brush picking and shellfish harvesting are important coastal enterprises, migrant workers, who often attend classes at night, might be brush pickers during the day or follow the tides to harvest shellfish from dozens of coastal inlets in the area. There are family entrepreneurs who own restaurants specializing in ethnic cuisine and retirees with time to improve their writing and speaking skills. The students come from different socio-economic backgrounds, their worldviews often diverge, and their life experiences may bear little resemblance to each other. Some of them have high levels of formal education from their countries of origin, and others have difficulty reading and writing in their first language. Some are naturalized citizens, most are employed and pay taxes in the US, and others are, no doubt, undocumented workers living here illegally. Their identities are complex and diverse.

There is tremendous diversity in English proficiency among these learners, as well. Some are beginners with little or no experience with English. Others never learned to read and write in their first language and may struggle to manipulate a pencil or develop the eye-hand coordination needed to draw the letters of the alphabet. Some learners are unable, or too
intimidated, to communicate in English without a translator, and they rarely hear or speak English outside of class. Others volunteer at the Salvation Army Thrift Shop or at the local mental health clinic; these learners venture into the community quite regularly to help out with field trips or teach about their language and culture in their children’s classrooms. Just as identities are complex and diverse, so are the ways in which adult ESOL learners use spoken and written language, both in their first language and in English.

Teaching in an ESOL classroom is both exciting and complicated. It is exciting because a myriad of cultural perspectives, personalities, educational histories, and family constellations are represented in just one classroom. Among other things, this diversity can stimulate learning opportunities and enrich classroom relationships. In addition, the ESOL classroom is exciting for educators because ESOL students are often highly invested in and appreciative of their learning experiences.

The ESOL classroom is also complicated, for the very diversity that makes it so interesting also makes it a challenging environment for teachers and students, alike. Immigrants live between cultures, languages, and family obligations, and these tensions color the educational needs of students and the dynamics of the classroom. Additional tensions result from program and policy requirements, differences in student and instructor expectations, and status and power issues among students. The interplay among these factors and their impact on learning and teaching are not easily characterized (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Hall, 1997; Norton, 2001).

**Language and Literacy as Cultural Practices**

As part of larger and more comprehensive adult literacy programs, adult ESOL classes are subject to some of the same assumptions that inform adult literacy program design and instruction (Auerbach, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan, 1996). Particularly pervasive has been the categorization of many adults as “illiterate,” suggesting that low-income, minority, or immigrant
families are literacy impoverished because their ability to read and write in English is limited (Auerbach, 1992; Crandall, 1993; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Freire, 1970; Street, 1995). It is easy to ignore the fact that immigrants and refugees are already competent members of several communities of language users with the linguistic repertoire consistent with their age, class, occupation, residence, or workplace, and who, at this time in their life, seek competence in the literacy practices of a new community. The dualism created by words such as "literate" or "illiterate," then, ignores the ways in which people understand and use a combination of spoken and written language skills and suggests an either-or categorization that obscures how our concepts of literacy are socially constructed (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Gee, 1990).

In the last 15 years, the literature for adult ESOL education has changed from ‘deficit’ based models to a greater emphasis on the non-unitary nature of using spoken and written language and a greater connection between speaking-reading-writing and the contexts in which they function (Breen, 2001; Gee, 1990; Perez, 1998). Contexts such as family, school, workplace, or community often require differing mixes of spoken and written forms of language for differing purposes. As Street (1995) has suggested, literacy practices are not autonomous, but are specific to particular contexts and defined by the customs of the communities in which they occur.

Such is the case in the adult ESOL classroom, where teachers make pedagogical choices about which language forms to present and which social relationships to model. Far from being neutral, these choices reflect particular cultural frames of reference and many culture-specific concepts (Gee, 1990; Matusov, 1999). Although adult ESOL learners come to the classroom with prior experience and knowledge with which they interpret the world, learning English is an acculturative experience, entailing more than just learning the linguistic forms of the language (Valdes, 1996). Because meaning is often obscured without an understanding of the social and
cultural conventions of language use, ESOL students are also immersed in social and cultural practices that are privileged in the classroom.

For most of the past half century, educational theory and practice have been based on assumptions about learning that are predominantly informed by psychological models that overlook the reality of these cultural and social aspects of the teaching and learning relationship. These models have emphasized that learning is an individual process with a beginning and an end, and that learning is the result of teaching (Wenger, 1998). Theories about learning in adulthood, in general, and about second language learning, in particular, have been powerfully influenced and constrained by these paradigms, both behaviorist and cognitivist, and they are reflected in pedagogical decisions regarding curriculum design, instruction, and assessment (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2001).

**Sociocultural Perspective of Language Learning**

In contrast to these psychological models, sociocultural approaches to learning, inspired to a great extent by Lev Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) research on children’s learning and development, offer more holistic notions of the complexity of learning. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and psycholinguist, developed a framework for learning that emphasizes the human activities that take place in socially and culturally shaped contexts, mediated by language and other symbol systems. Vygotsky’s work, and the extensions of it that have followed, "attempt to describe how learning and cognition are socially shared, created through linguistic and cultural practices, and take place not in an individual's head but in the interactions between individuals in different situations" (Pintrich, 1994, p. 143). From a sociocultural perspective, these activities are best examined in the context of their cultural and historical development, (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).
A significant body of research and theory building that has developed around this approach to learning as socially situated activity is commonly referred to as situated cognition or situated learning. Situated learning theorists present learning as essentially interactive, contextual, and the result of participation in practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a). Learners are seen as active participants in the negotiation of meaning, which occurs during the activities of daily living and working, as well as in more formal settings, such as classrooms. Knowing, then, is a matter of participating in and engaging with the world (Brufee, 1993; Perez, 1998; Wenger, 1998a).

Communities of Practice

A further extension of situated learning is learning as social participation in communities of practice, as conceptualized by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998a). A community of practice is defined by the practices or common activities that are shared within the community, and practice, in this context, “places the emphasis on what people do and how they give meaning to their actions and to the world through everyday engagement” and focuses on "what people do together and on the cultural resources they produce in the process" (Wenger, 1998a, p. 283). Newcomers increasingly broaden the complexity and scope of their participation in the enterprise, or community, thus further developing their identities within the community.

According to Wenger, practices “evolve as shared histories of learning” (1998a, p. 87) through the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement and the development of a shared repertoire. These three characteristics are interrelated and dynamic, for they are continually being created, renewed, and transformed through participation.

The first characteristic, the negotiation of a joint enterprise, refers to what the community is engaged in, as understood by its members. According to Wenger (1998a), a joint enterprise develops as members define their roles, develop shared understandings of what is happening, and
respond to everyday activities. The negotiation of a joint enterprise requires a level of awareness of the community’s purpose and a willingness to identify with and participate in its practices. Members shape the enterprise through their participation, but their participation is also impacted and shaped by the enterprise as it develops.

The second characteristic, mutual engagement, expresses the way in which participants function in a community of practice. As Wenger describes it, “It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as . . . the contributions and knowledge of others . . .” (p. 76). Mutual engagement is the sustained interpersonal dimension of practice, reflected in the ways in which relationships are formed, and what participants do together to maintain the community. It involves “discovering how to engage” and “defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what, who is easy or hard to get along with . . .” (p. 95). This characteristic describes the interdependent features of participation in practice. That interdependence is actualized, for example, when members of a community arrange for, bargain for, discuss, debate, handle, mediate, or organize the activities of the practice. These interactions are all negotiations of some form and result in an “experience of meaning” (p.52).

The third characteristic, the development of a shared repertoire, refers to the various resources, both material and social, that are created, adapted, or adopted by community members through their participation. Identified as the “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted” (p. 83), these resources may be developed by ‘creating or breaking routines; producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; inventing and redefining or abandoning words, gestures, symbols; and telling and retelling (stories)” (p. 95).
The Problem

Everyday, educators immerse themselves in the business of learning; we study it, plan for it, and assess it. Yet, we find it hard to articulate just what it is or how it occurs among students in our classrooms. While there is an abundance of literature offering prescriptive advice for working with students in the classroom, group dynamics are often discussed as if they are a byproduct of education rather than a central part of the learning and teaching relationship.

The sociocultural perspective, however, and situated approaches in particular, place participation and group dynamics at the center of learning. This perspective has received attention in classroom studies on language and literacy in the K-12 system (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Perez, 1998), and the communities of practice model is being used in professional education programs.

However, there has been a knowledge gap in adult learning settings, particularly in adult literacy education and in ESOL in particular (Bonk & Kim, 1998; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Hall, 1997; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). This study aimed to help fill that gap through an investigation of an adult learning venue that has become a commonplace in this country – an adult ESOL classroom.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of a community of practice in an adult ESOL classroom. I chose this study because, as a community college instructor, I am particularly interested in the teaching/learning relationship and its impact on my students. Although there is no shortage of theories purporting to explain how adults learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1998), none has resonated with my experiences as a teacher of ESOL. Learning as participation in communities of practice, which provides the theoretical framework for this investigation, seemed promising, and in particular, three defining characteristics of a community
of practice: (a) the negotiation of a joint enterprise, (b) mutual engagement, and (c) the
development of a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998a). The overarching question that guided this
study was:

How does a community of practice develop in an adult ESOL classroom, and
how are the three characteristics manifested in its practices?

**Definitions**

In this study, I use several terms when referring to students and immigrants and refugees. When they are enrolled in government-supported language programs, I employ the term *ESOL student*. When making the distinction between American born students and immigrant and refugees, I employ the terms *non-native English speaker* and *native English speaker*. The latter distinction is controversial, as some writers believe these terms are reductionistic (Firth & Wagner, 1997); however, by using these terms, I believe I can make important distinctions when working with a large and varied student body.

*Communicative competence* is another term that is employed in the document. As used in second language acquisition literature, communicative competence is the ability to use language for meaningful interaction (Hymes, 1971; Savignon, 1972); it is the ability to contribute to and then sustain the conditions that make shared interpretations possible (Gumperz, 1984). It is a “dynamic, interpersonal construct that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meaning interpersonally within specific contexts” (Brown, 1994, p. 227). Dell Hymes (1971) introduced the concept when he argued that language acquisition was social and cultural, and that both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of communication were necessary for meaningful interaction. Hymes also believed that communicative competence was shaped by social interaction; therefore, when I use the term, it is not meant to connote a fixed capacity.
Significance of the Study

I believe this study has value for teachers, curriculum developers, and other educational planners who work with adults. For those educators who seek to continually extend their knowledge base, there is no better place to start than in the classroom, with teachers who can share their experience and understanding of students and the teaching context (Bailey & Nunan, 1995). Since sociocultural and situated approaches to learning and development address issues that focus directly on the social and contextual nature of classroom life and learning, this suggests a look at how and for what purpose classroom activities are designed and assessed and how particular environments may support or constrain learning. It also suggests examining how learning experiences contribute to and are affected by the personal and social identities of adult learners and how those experiences are empowering or disempowering for linguistically and culturally diverse students. In addition, teachers and administrators may gain insight into how to help communities get started and now to nurture their development in adult literacy settings.

Conceptually, and because the theory of learning as participation in communities of practice was developed in non school settings, research in this area might address the highly contested notion that authentic learning is even possible in classroom settings (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Further research might examine more examples of adult learning in culturally mediated activity where traditional boundaries between cognition and environment or individual agency and social context are not clear.

Methodologically, this study represents a departure from a good deal of research on ESOL learning. The unit of analysis in this study, for example, is a classroom community of practice rather than individual psychological phenomena; in addition, the researcher is also the teacher for the class under investigation. Practitioners and researchers alike may learn from the strengths and the weaknesses of this research approach.
CHAPTER 2

THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of a community of practice in an adult ESOL classroom. This chapter presents the theoretical and empirical literature, which grounded the study and provided the framework for data analysis. It is organized in the following way: (a) the impact of cultural-historical theory, (b) assumptions of situated learning, (c) learning as participation in communities of practice, and (d) second language acquisition and ESOL.

The Impact of Cultural-Historical Theory

Recently, the social and cultural dimensions of learning have received a great deal of attention in educational research, resulting in a number of assumptions about how humans learn and develop. One premise shared by sociocultural approaches is that “[H]uman minds develop in social situations and …they use the tools and representational media that culture provides to support, extend and reorganize mental functioning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 11).

Sociocultural approaches to learning differ from a Cartesian worldview grounded in mind-matter dualism, which suggest the polarization of the learner and the learning context (Barab, Hay, Barnett, & Squire, 2001). Current sociocultural approaches to learning are informed by the cultural-historical theorizing of early 20th century Marxist psychologists in Russia, most particularly, L. S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky and his colleagues developed complex assumptions about learning that combined history, social institutions, cultural artifacts, and signs
and meanings, as well as activity, cognition, and interpersonal interactions (Newman & Holzman, 1993). Although Vygotsky’s cultural historical theorizing is complex and multidimensional, several assumptions are especially pertinent to the current study.

First, Vygotsky considered learning and cognitive development to be inextricably connected, and he believed that learning preceded cognitive development (Wolfe, 1999). Vygotsky was convinced that elementary or natural mental processes (simple perception, memory and attention) transform into higher order mental processes (decision-making, comprehension of language, voluntary or selective attention, and logical memory) over time in interaction in sociocultural settings.

Next, Vygotsky believed this transformation was made possible through the introduction of mediating influences in the environment, which connect us to our world (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Vygotsky focused much of his work on the mediating influence of language on human consciousness, reasoning that our behavior is shaped and transformed by this important sign system. Furthermore, since language is culturally produced, it is one of the primary mechanisms by which culture becomes an integral part of every person. In this way, tool use and the sociocultural setting facilitate the development of higher order cognitive processes and of language use and thinking, allowing us to transform our environment and to act in and on our world. In an adult ESOL classroom, mediating influences might be pencils, classroom computers, dictionaries, mnemonic strategies for remembering new vocabulary, specialized vocabulary associated with writing, or the assistance of a classmate or teacher.

One of the concepts most often associated with mediation is the zone of proximal development or ZPD, which Vygotsky explained in the 1978 translation of Mind in Society.

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem
solving under … guidance… or in collaboration with more capable peers… the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively (1978, p. 86).

Focusing on dialogue as a mediating influence in instructional situations, Wertsch (1991) and Gallimore & Tharp (1990) extended the ZPD with the concepts of *situation definition* and *intersubjectivity*. The situation definition refers to the state of understanding that an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances; intersubjectivity refers to shared situational definitions that develop through negotiation. In an adult ESOL classroom, given an assignment to form a group and develop a survey on a topic of interest to them, students may be quite clear that they have an assignment to complete, yet at the same time, not share a situational definition of what is involved in the task. Eventually, and in order to complete the assignment, the students will reach a state of intersubjectivity or shared situational definitions.

Somewhat differently, Jerome Bruner (1990) conceptualized the interaction between participants in the ZPD as a *loan of consciousness* (p. 76) from the more capable participant. He introduced a metaphor that has also become well known in education, that of *scaffolding* (p. 77). Referring to the teaching-learning dynamic, where assistance of any kind is given, a scaffold implies firm, reliable support. In language classrooms, effective scaffolds allow one student or helper to extend her understanding in such a way that another student is able to share in the situational definition or intersubjectivity. Donato (1994) studied collective scaffolding in an adult foreign language classroom by examining the discourse of the students as they practiced with each other. Donato found that interindividual help was clearly present in the interactions, and that second language learners were quite capable and skillful at providing scaffolding help for each other. Donato’s findings also point out the importance of examining complete dialogic events as opposed to simple and short conversational adjustments among language learners.
Yet another important assumption of cultural historical theorizing stressed studying all phenomena in the process of change. Vygotsky and his colleagues believed that psychological phenomena are too complex to isolate and study and can only be understood as they develop in a culturally specific, situated activity (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Vygotsky, 1987). He and his colleagues reasoned that behavioral development ought to be studied through the *process* of development, which is dynamic, rather than through the *outcomes* of development, which are static.

This work led to an important extension of cultural historical theory focused specifically on activity. Activity theory asserts that human action, or *activity*, ought to be the central organizing concept and basic unit of analysis for understanding the development of learning. It is in action that context is provided and within which the individual and society are understood as interrelated. From this standpoint, research that attempts to describe and interpret attitudes, isolated concepts, or specific linguistic knowledge structures, in the pursuit of a definition of learning, is misguided and bound to be unsuccessful (Wertsch, 1991; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

What is fundamental to this aspect of sociocultural theory is the inseparability of thinking and activity; activity adherents assert, “every cognitive act must be viewed as a specific response to a specific set of circumstances” (Resnick, 1991, p. 4). To acknowledge the importance of interaction and environment on learning, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) suggest that four dimensions of investigation be added to traditional research on language learning: how the person is acting, where the person is acting, why the person is acting, and when the activity occurs. The first three dimensions, proposed by Wertsch (1998), would account for the use of material and psychological tools, the setting, and the motives and goals underlying the activity; the fourth dimension would take into account how the activity developed into its existing form.
Vygotsky’s work sheds light on the importance of interaction, the environment, and the “fact that it is our cultural history and not our biology that endows us with uniquely human ways of thinking” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 143). In large part, sociocultural theorizing and the situated perspectives that follow all share the basic tenet that “human mental functioning is inherently situated in social interactional, cultural, and historical contexts” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 86).

**Situated Learning**

In the past 15 years, there have been a number of extensions of the work by Vygotsky and his colleagues that fall under the umbrella terms *situated learning* or *situated cognition*. These perspectives reflect a diversity of academic disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology, but all of them challenge the notion that learning can be decontextualized or separated from the activity, the context, or the culture in which it occurs. By emphasizing the activity, context, and culture in which learning takes place, situated learning perspectives focus on learning as social practice, and call into question the epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical assumptions of much of schooled learning. According to Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989),

> All knowledge is, we believe, like language. Its constituent parts index the world and so are inextricably a product of the activity and situations in which they are produced. A concept, for example, will continually evolve with each new occasion of use, because new situations, negotiations, and activities inevitably recast it in a new, more densely textured form. So a concept, like the meaning of a word, is always under construction. This would also appear to be true of apparently well-defined, abstract technical concepts. Even these are not wholly definable and defy categorical description; part of their meaning is always inherited for the context of use. (p. 33)
Activity and context were the focus of research on learning in craft apprenticeship programs among midwives, tailors, quartermasters, and meat cutters by Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991). They found interesting forms of participation among these apprentices as they developed expertise in different fields. For the novice midwives, tailors, and quartermasters, learning occurred in authentic settings, and they worked alongside the experienced master, or expert; through observation, trial and error, and increasing opportunities to demonstrate their ability, they learned. At the same time, the novices were treated as legitimate, though novice, participants in the trade they were apprenticing in.

As a result of this research, Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* to explain how new learners can develop the physical and cognitive skills and the tool use of more knowledgeable, experienced adults.

Legitimate peripheral participation is intended as a conceptual bridge – as a claim about the common processes inherent in the production of changing persons and changing communities of practice. This pivotal emphasis, via legitimate peripheral participation, on relations between the production of knowledgeable identities and the production of communities of practice, makes it possible to think of sustained learning as embodying, albeit in transformed ways, the structural characteristics of communities of practice.

(p. 148)

Legitimate peripheral participation describes the process through which novices or newcomers gain access, in increasing complexity, to the core practices and meanings that define membership in a community. Drawing on the collaborative social interaction of craft apprenticeships, where learning is embedded in particular activities and anchored activities are grounded in problem-rich contexts, this situated learning perspective is based on assumptions that “knowing, thinking, and understanding are generated in practice” (Lave, 1997, p. 19), and
that new learners become a part of existing practices through their “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

Given the chance to observe and practice in situ the behavior of members of a culture, people pick up relevant jargon, imitate behavior, and gradually start to act in accordance with its norms. The ease and success with which people do this . . . belie the eminent importance of the process and obscures that fact that what they pick up is a product of the ambient culture rather than of explicit teaching. (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 34)

**Learning as Participation in a Community of Practice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) theorize from the anthropological perspective, arguing that conventional theories of learning are dualistic, separate the person from the context, and present knowledge as a decontextualized entity that is somehow internalized by individuals. They further suggested that effective learning occurs when it is embedded in authentic practice among authentic practitioners; they referred to this as *learning as participation in communities of practice* (p. 42). It is this notion of learning that provides the conceptual basis for this study.

According to Pea, Brown, and Hawkins (1998), this theory represents one of the “…new and exciting interdisciplinary syntheses … to…characterize the complex relations of social and mental life, and for understanding successful learning wherever it occurs…” (p. xi).

Building on their prior research, Wenger (1998a) engaged in a year long ethnographic case study of insurance claims processors and further developed the communities of practice concept. He became a participant observer during the research, so his perspective was both etic, as a researcher, and emic, as a novice claims processor. Wenger premised his conceptualization on the following assumptions:

1. We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.
2. Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises.

3. Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, of active engagement in the world.

4. Meaning, our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful, is ultimately what learning is to produce. (p. 4)

Wenger further theorized that four key components of a community of practice are interrelated. The first component, practice, refers to activity.

Things have to be done, relationships worked out, processes invented, situations interpreted, artifacts produced, conflicts resolved. We may have different enterprises, which give our practices different characters. Nevertheless, pursuing them always involves the same kind of embodied, delicate, active, social, negotiated, complex process of participation. (p.49)

The idea of practice emphasizes what people do and how they give meaning to their actions and to the social world, through everyday engagement. Through practice, meaning is socially produced, and it is through practice that the idea of community is given coherence; furthermore, through practice, we are able to understand learning as an emergent process (Wenger, 1998a). We become members of a community because of what we do together-our shared practices.

The second component is meaning. Just as variations in how people think are connected to the circumstances in which their thinking occurs (Lave, 1988), the meanings we derive from our practices are possible only in the context of those practices. Wenger (1998a) writes that ‘practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life’ (p. 52), suggesting that the work we do in our practice is an on-going negotiation of meaning. When we reinterpret, modify, confirm, rewrite, restate, extend or omit, for example, we are engaging in the negotiation of meaning. All
of this we do in social practice. As a result, Wenger contends, meaning resides in social practice, not in our individual minds; the meanings we derive from our actions occur in an on-going process of negotiation with other members of the community:

The concept of negotiation often denotes reaching an agreement between people, as in “negotiating a price,” but it is not limited to that usage. It is also used to suggest an accomplishment that requires sustained attention and readjustment, as in “negotiating a sharp curve.” I want to capture both aspects at once…. (Wenger, 1998a, p. 53)

The third component, community, is characterized as a joint enterprise understood and continually renegotiated by its members, functioning through a mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity, and which produces the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members also develop over time. According to Wenger (1998a), conflict and disagreement are also hallmarks of a joint enterprise. The coherence that makes the community of practice strong is practice; one of the characteristics of practice is the negotiation of a joint enterprise. The joint enterprise reflects a shared domain of interest, a shared commitment, and a shared competence. From this perspective, what the members of a community do together and how they define and make sense of what they do together is the joint enterprise; it is a communal response to their situation.

The final component of the community of practice quartet is identity. When we belong to a particular group or have an affiliation, we become invested in these connections, and the ways in which we belong become constitutive of our identities. Membership, then, “is a matter of participation and learning, and identity involves ways of relating to the world" (Wenger, 1998a, p. 283).
Wenger (1998b) introduced the following five stages in the life of a community of practice:

1. Potential; people face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice. The activities at this stage include finding each other and discovering commonalities.

2. Coalescing; members come together and recognize their potential. The activities at this stage include exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise, negotiating community.

3. Active; members engage in developing a practice. The activities at this stage include engaging in joint activities, creating artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment, and relationships.

4. Dispersed; members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a center of knowledge. The activities at this stage include staying in touch, communicating, holding reunions, and calling for advice.

5. Memorable; the community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities. The activities at this stage include telling stories, preserving artifacts, collecting memorabilia.

**Dualities within the Community of Practice Model**

There are a number of dualities associated with a community of practice framework. According to Wenger (1998a), dualities are not opposites but tensions, and they present problems for the design of learning.

*Participation and Reification.* One criticism of traditional schooling is that there is an imbalance between opportunities to participate and the production of objects that represent participation. Reifications represent “abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts” (p. 59) but don’t always take the form of objects. In the negotiation of meaning, for example, words can represent reifications but seem like “pure participation” (p. 62). Too much reified subject matter
“may create the illusion of simple, direct unproblematic relations between an individual learner and elements of a subject matter” (p. 265). In a community of practice, learning is a continual negotiation between participation and reification instead of a focus on the mechanics of information transmission and acquisition.

*Designed and Emergent.* Refers to the relation between teaching and learning. Our practices and our identities in practice are both emergent in character and amenable to design. If too much of the practice is planned or designed, then participation will be less responsive; our practices and our identities in practice require both intention and responsiveness.

*Identification and Negotiability.* Refers to the effect of educational design on learning. Communities of practice experience a tension between practices and identities that privilege certain perspectives over others. Both access to participation and opportunities to participate can be fostered or constrained by the design of learning.

*Local and Global.* Refers to the balance between “connecting educational experiences to other experiences” (p. 264). Communities of practice define, determine, and create much of their own learning, but this is not the case in much of schooling where abstract learning is valued for its generality.

**Differences between Psychological and Anthropological Approaches to Situated Learning and Community of Practice**

One of the differences among situated approaches to learning from a psychological (and educational) perspective and from an anthropological perspective is in their focus on learning in school contexts. Whereas the former perspectives situate content in problems and practices that students will encounter outside of school (Barab & Duffy, 2000), the latter perspectives focus on learning as a function of being a part of a community. Psychological views suggest that meaning is produced in interaction among people, while anthropological
views suggest that in addition to meanings, identities and communities are also produced. Psychological views look at learning environments more as practice fields, while anthropological views frame learning environments as communities of practice (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1993; Senge, 1994). These differences between practice fields and communities of practice are useful to note since they point out the difference between the activity of an individual in a collaborative setting and the patterns of participation in a community of practice. These differences highlight some reasons that Lave and Wenger’s theory of learning as participation in a community of practice was developed outside formal learning environments.

**Research and the Community of Practice Model**

Wenger’s social theory of learning and its community of practice framework have been most commonly associated with research on organizations; however, a growing number of studies that use this model have been conducted in educational settings. The following studies all have significance for the current research. The Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) research highlights the impact of social identity in a community of practice and was one of the earliest studies; the Lindsay (2000) research highlights the impact of social identity and developing expertise in the process of social learning, and the Barab and Duffy (2000) study extends the community of practice theorizing.

In 1995, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet examined the construction of gender, class, and power relations between two groups of high school students. Using linguistic and ethnographic data generated over a three-year period, through participant observation, interviews, group discussions and several public events, the researchers investigated informal communities of practice that formed around the jocks and the burnout. Two findings are significant: (a) the communities were formed, not “by their membership but by the endeavors that bring those
members (and others who have preceded or will succeed them) into relation with one another and by the practices that develop around, and transform, these endeavors” (p. 504), and (b) identities and social relations were produced through the linguistic and social practices of the community of practice. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, we move in and out of many communities of practice throughout our lives, and as a result, we transform our identities, our understandings, and our worldviews.

Lindsay’s case study (2000) of a small cohort of occupational therapy (OT) students in the fieldwork phase of their training was conducted with participants at a small liberal arts college in the southeast. The OT learning experience, designed to maximize the opportunities for authentic practice was a successful apprenticeship, according to the findings of the study. More specifically, Lindsay found that identities were transformed and expertise developed through access to and participation in authentic practice. Students reported increased confidence, developing expertise, and transformative experiences as a result of their legitimate peripheral participation as developing OTs.

Another notable study conducted, within a professional development program for preservice teachers at Indiana University, used a community of practice framework (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Highly field-based and similar to the OT program, this community of teachers (CoT) is founded on six principles: a notion of community; personalization; apprenticeship; intensive fieldwork; authentic performance; and democratic governance. Based on their research, the authors found the following features essential for a community of practice:

A common cultural and historical heritage. Communities go beyond the simple coming together for a particular moment in response to a specific need. Successful communities have a common cultural and historical heritage that partially captures the socially negotiated meanings. This includes shared goals, meanings, and practices. However,
unlike the social negotiation of practice fields that primarily occurs on the fly, in communities of practice new members inherit much of these goals, meanings, and practices from previous community members’ experiences in which they were hypothesized, tested, and socially agreed on.

Interdependent system. Individuals are a part of something larger as they work within the context and become interconnected to the community, which is also a part of something larger (the society through which it has meaning or value). This helps provide a sense of shared purpose, as well as an identity, for the individual and the larger community.

Reproduction cycle. It is important that communities have the ability to reproduce as new members engage in mature practice with near peers and exemplars of mature practice. Over time, these newcomers come to embody the communal practice (and rituals) and may even replace old timers. (p. 36)

Barab & Duffy (2000) extend Wenger’s theorizing by contrasting communities of learners and groups of students who learn collaboratively. For example, while practice fields may support shared goals, understandings, and practices, it is in a community of learners that experience is embedded so that individuals are contributing to their own identity development as they contribute to the development of the community. In addition, while students working collaboratively may come together around a particular task, in a community of learners, individuals are central to the community and part of an interdependent system. And finally, a sustainable community with a significant history distinguishes a community of learners from more temporary configurations of learners.
Dilemmas Associated with the Community of Practice Model

While communities of practice unify through participation and mutual engagement, they can also circumscribe behavior and narrowly define identities. As a result of research on the development of “authentic community” in K-12 education, Sergiovanni (2000) cautions that the hard reality is that community, like fire, can be helpful or harmful. By its very nature, community is both inclusive and exclusive. It can bring some people together while leaving others out. Further, community can exaggerate difference with others, causing fragmentation, disengagement, and conflict. (p. 68)

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) offer a critique and point out several weaknesses of Wenger’s theory, based on their research of teachers in four secondary schools in Britain. Using a community of practice analysis, the authors found two central concepts that need strengthening. The first is Wenger’s (1998) assertion that communities of practice are essential for any learning, yet Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, “participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning” (p. 98). Hodkinson and Hodkinson see this as a contradiction; based on their research, the first claim has greater significance. According to them, “we need to belong to learn; whatever it is that we belong to, can be called a community of practice” (p. 3). The second concept that they critique is the nature and position of legitimate peripheral participation; based on their data, there are significant differences between the learning for full members of a community of practice and those of newcomers. “Thus, legitimate peripheral participation applies to those entering a community, or… significantly changing … relationships within it…. there is nothing inevitable about the process, even for a newcomer” (p. 5). In their conclusion, the authors suggest that

The deeper underlying principles of relational social learning need to be freed up from too great a focus upon either communities of practice, or legitimate peripheral
participation. Perhaps above all, our analysis suggests that it is not helpful to develop this theorizing around universal definitions and boundaries of communities of practice, or their supposedly generalisable characteristics. (p. 8)

**Sociocultural Theory, Second Language Acquisition and ESOL**

Educators who teach English to immigrants and refugees straddle two disciplines; we are funded under adult literacy and often share space with our sister programs ABE and GED. The literature that informs our teaching, however, comes primarily from SLA and applied linguistics research on how adults learn new languages.

Although acquiring a first language is complicated, it is also a relatively quick process (Mackey, 2006). Learning a second language after childhood, however, is much more difficult and less likely to result in complete mastery or fluency; in fact, as adults, we usually take years to reach a level of fluency that children are able to attain by the age of three. Individual differences have a greater impact on second language acquisition than on first language acquisition, a situation that has prompted a great deal of research in the field of SLA (Ellis, 1997). Second language acquisition (SLA) is the formal study of the learning processes and teaching practices that are involved in learning a new language; the theoretical writing and research that informs most of ESOL practice comes from the SLA literature.

Sociocultural theory and its foundational writing are relatively new to SLA. Whereas psychological approaches to language and literacy development once dominated the SLA field, the social and cultural dimensions of language learning have increasingly interested researchers in the field (Hall, 1997; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). From a sociocultural perspective, classrooms are significant settings for research on learning and teaching because all of us, regardless of age, generally encounter some kind of learning experience in a classroom.
For Hall (1997), classrooms are fundamental sites of language development, “as it is in the communicative practices of these classrooms that teachers and students together develop particular understandings of what constitutes language and language learning” (p. 304). Hall points out several aspects of interaction that are important to the learning and teaching relationship. First, as communicative competence develops, speakers are better able to interpret and respond to the talk around them, to develop creative ways of participating in talk, and to become more actively involved in reaching individual goals. Second, language development is fostered through guided participation with more experienced others when students have opportunities to not only practice but also to reflect on their patterns of use.

**Sociocultural Research in SLA**

There have been a number of research studies, in the past 10 years, using sociocultural theory to examine aspects of second language development. Vygotsky’s work and activity theory have informed research on negotiation and scaffolding (Donato, 1994), interlanguage development (Swain, 1980), and the zone of proximal development in a foreign language education program (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997) and a college writing center (Young, Adams, & Davis, 1999).

Nyikos & Hashimoto conducted a study of graduate students enrolled in a teacher education course on cooperative learning. The students were assigned to small groups and were responsible for writing a collaborative term paper. Using a Vygotskian framework, the researchers found that several elements were necessary for the ZPD to function among these adult learners: (a) social interaction, (b) cognitive development as a means of constructing new understanding through problem solving and critical thinking, (c) self-regulation as a response to power relationships and affective factors, and (d) language as a tool to mediate these factors.
In all cases, the significant element turned out to be what the researchers called social support; their findings showed “the importance of social and thus affective support that must be present to foster learning in a group ZPD” (p. 515).

Issues of identity have been investigated in patterns of participation among immigrant language learners (Norton, 2001) and among high school ESL students transitioning from high school to college (Harklau, 1999). In both studies, access to and opportunities to participate in learning situations were critical issues for the research participants.

In adult literacy research, studies that have significance for ESOL students include recent practitioner research at the National Labsite for Adult ESOL at Portland State University, under the direction of Stephen Reder. Although currently focused on low proficiency students, the breadth of their proposed research is encouraging. One study, investigating the role of pair work in language development (Shane, 2004), confirms that student-to-student interaction is important to second language acquisition. However, the researcher states that “students will learn what they need to learn in their pair-work negotiations,” a conclusion that overlooks misleading information that one student gives another and misunderstandings that arise when accents and vocabulary interfere with meaning. Students may not learn what they need if the input or information they receive is incorrect to begin with.

In 2001, a major study conducted by Beder and Medina for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, looked at classroom dynamics in 20 adult literacy classes in eight states. Researchers observed each of the classes on two separate occasions and completed detailed field notes of each observations. Kegan (2001) and his colleagues conducted research on learning and development in three cohort groups of adult learners. His findings show that community is an important context for adult learning, and he suggests that holding environments be created in adult learning venues, in the form of a cohort. For the adult literacy
students who were part of a cohort, it ‘made a critical difference to their academic learning, their emotional and psychological well being, and their ability to broaden their perspectives” (p. 14).

A good holding environment, like a community of practice, provides appropriate support, challenge, and continuity and stability during the process of growth.

**Implications of the Literature for the Present Study**

A review of the literature shows that a gap exists in the research on language and learning in ESOL classrooms from a situated perspective; it was this gap that shaped the problem for this study. While sociocultural theory has been applied to aspects of the language learning process, research on adult ESOL classrooms is limited. Indeed, the community of practice model is largely absent from the theoretical and empirical literature on adult literacy and ESOL, in particular. Because there is still much to understand about the nature of learning a new language as an adult, a case study approach, using the community of practice perspective, offers a useful lens for examining classroom dynamics and learning in practice.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of a community of practice in an adult ESOL classroom. This chapter describes the methodology for the investigation and is organized into the following sections: (a) conceptual framework, (b) design of the study, (c) the research setting, (d) cross-cultural considerations, (e) the study sample, (f) in their own words, (g) data sources, (h) data collection and handling, (i) data analysis, (j) validity, and (k) my role as teacher-researcher.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998a) and their theory of learning as social participation in communities of practice. A community of practice is made up of a socially interdependent group of people who share common understandings about the practices, beliefs and goals of the community over an extended period of time. Identified by their practices, communities emerge through interactions rather than design, and gain their richness, complexity and opportunities for learning through their multigenerational structures and member pathways for movement through the community. Wenger defined a community of practice

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds…As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with
each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. (p. 45)

Three characteristics that help define a community of practice were used as sensitizing concepts to guide the study. They are the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire.

The negotiation of a joint enterprise develops as members define their roles, develop shared understandings of what is happening, and respond to everyday activities. The negotiation of a joint enterprise requires a level of awareness of the community’s purpose and a willingness to identify with and participate in its practices. Members shape the enterprise through their participation, but their participation is also impacted and shaped by the enterprise as it develops.

Mutual engagement is the sustained interpersonal dimension of practice, reflected in the ways in which relationships are formed, and what participants do together to maintain the community. This characteristic describes the features of interaction among participants in practice that result in an experience of meaning.

The development of a shared repertoire refers to the various resources, both material and social, that are created, adapted, or adopted by community members through their participation. A shared repertoire takes time and sustained interaction to develop.

Because qualitative research is essentially an inductive enterprise, it can be argued that this kind of research is designed to be theory creating and theory discovering rather than theory driven. However, when working in an area that is well theorized, as in this study, it is possible to be inductive even within that preexisting theory. The sensitizing concepts provided the initial categories for the data analysis; however, the data collection and the coding of the data were done inductively.
Design of the Study

The research design that seemed well suited to this investigation was a qualitative case study. Because case study is generally descriptive and inductive, Merriam (1998) recommends this design when the focus of study is clearly delimited or bounded.

If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case. One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite amount of time for observations. (p. 28)

Furthermore, case study is employed in order to provide “an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p. 19). According to Yin (1989), a case study approach is appropriate in order "to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p. 23). This study met these conditions and deserves further elaboration.

First, case study is particularly well suited to investigations that are bounded by a specific setting or place and a fixed period of time. Because the research setting for this study was a high-level ESOL classroom, and the study was conducted over a finite period of two academic quarters, this study was certainly bounded by place and time. The number of informants was limited to the students enrolled in the course and the teacher-researcher. Second, a case study approach is useful when the research emphasis includes the broader context in which activity occurs. For this study, it was important to capture the dynamic aspects of classroom life, including the on-going relationships among the students and their participation in the activities of the classroom. Finally, case study is also appropriate when multiple sources of data are used. In this case, it was necessary to generate data from a variety of sources so that three broad areas of
the classroom could be examined. Those sources included classroom observation, individual and group interviews, student writing, and taped classroom activities.

The emphasis in a case study approach, investigating the context in which activity occurs, offered a more holistic view of teaching and learning, and allowed me to "provide a way to take important personal, cultural and social phenomena into account" (Johnson, 1993, p. 9).

One footnote to the choice of design for this study is the approach to data analysis. In order to preserve a holistic view, it was important to use contextualizing strategies as well as coding and categorizing strategies. Because coding and categorizing strategies initially fracture the data before reconstructing them, thus losing the contextual ties, it was appropriate to use contextualizing strategies as well.

In breaking up the data, we lose information about relationships between different parts of the data. We lose our sense of process – of how things interact or ‘hang together’. To capture this information, we need to link data as well as categorize it. [L] inking data involves recognizing substantive rather than formal relations between things. Formal relations are concerned with how things relate in terms of similarity and difference – how far they do or do not share the same characteristics. Substantive relations are concerned with how things interact. (Dey, 1993, p. 152)

The Research Setting

The setting for this research study was a high-level ESOL class at West Coast College (a pseudonym) in the Pacific Northwest. West Coast College is a small two-year community college with an enrollment of approximately 6,500 full time and part time students. The college offers certificate and associate degree programs in a number of professional and technical fields, and there is an academic track for students who plan to transfer to a four-year college or university in the area. Located in a small city that advertises its quality of life and defense-
related job opportunities, the college serves a large rural area that encompasses seven small communities. In a typical academic quarter, about 100 students, or approximately 1.5% of the student population at West Coast College, were enrolled in ESOL classes.

The ESOL program offered free English classes to immigrants and refugees but did not require documentation of legal status. New ESOL students were required to attend a three-hour Orientation, where standardized tests in reading and listening and informal assessments of speaking and writing determined student placement. Five levels of English classes were offered at the time of the study, from advanced beginner (Level 2) to pre-college levels (Level 6). Once a student’s level of fluency was determined, she could choose speaking and listening focused classes two days a week, reading and writing focused classes two days a week, or both. Additional stand-alone courses in basic computer skills, EL Civics, and GED preparation were available, as well as integrated classes that combined ESOL and early childhood education, welding, and nursing assistant certification. As the only full-time faculty lead, I was responsible for curriculum development, scheduling, and staff supervision of five adjunct faculty members, plus one teaching aide and a program assistant. Budget oversight was provided by the ABE/GED program director, and we shared program-planning duties with the Dean of Workforce Development.

The data for the study was collected in a Level 5 ESOL class, which met twice a week for 3.5 hours each day. The last hour of each class was set aside for basic computer instruction, setting up e-mail, word processing, and simple Internet research. I developed the entire curriculum for the class, guided by written competencies from the state’s Office of Adult Literacy. Historically, the ESOL program did not require that students purchase textbooks, and the program did not have the funds to provide them. Enrollment fluctuated between 15 and 18 students each quarter. Each year, between 10 and 20 ESOL students completed Level 5 and
went on to matriculate into regular tuition-bearing English classes at West Coast College. The most popular programs were Nursing, Culinary Arts, and Medical Assisting, but students also chose higher-level developmental English courses and college-transfer classes in speech communication and art.

**Cross-Cultural Considerations**

Cultural differences in adult education settings affect the learning environment in complex ways (Guy, 1999), and the diversity of native languages, social and cultural identities, educational backgrounds, and academic needs among ESOL students present challenges to conducting research in these settings. As a middle-class European American woman, I have to be realistic about my own enculturation and the impossibility of representing an emic, or insider, view of the classroom in this study. In addition to my own cultural frames of reference, my positioning as a teacher, my limited understanding of the norms the participants had for talking about themselves and their experiences, and the exclusive use of English throughout the study also complicated the process (Briggs, 1986). Following Matsumoto (1994) and Patton (1990), the potential for misunderstanding is especially significant when diversity in so many areas exists, and it was important that I attempt to ameliorate the cultural problems and increase the validity of this cross-cultural study in two ways.

One strategy was to employ the assistance of bi-lingual collaborators as language representatives. Our language differences could have made the translation of some words, phrases, and ideas quite difficult, for example, and differences in cultural norms could have made some topics and questions uncomfortable for the participants. Although I could not find bilingual speakers for every language represented in the study, I was able to locate four immigrants who were bilingual in a first language (Japanese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Chinese) and English. Initially, I met with each of the collaborators to explain the study and ask for their
participation. I asked them to read and comment on the clarity of the questions; I also asked
them to comment on the cultural appropriateness of the individual interview questions and to
examine the interviews for hidden misunderstandings. Although none of the collaborators would
accept the modest compensation I offered, all four enthusiastically offered their help. Their
feedback helped me improve the clarity of several of the individual interview questions.

Another strategy was the use of member checks. I hoped that by sharing some of the
preliminary analysis with the respondents, and asking for their comments, my perspective might
benefit from member checks used in this way. During the study, I chose what data to attend to
and what to ignore, and I controlled the final analysis, interpretation, and presentation.
Matsumoto (1994) suggests that all researchers must deal with the problem of selective attention
because our socialization prepares us to attend to certain things in our environment and to miss
or ignore others. The additional role and my responsibilities as teacher complicated the process
further (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). For these reasons, I believed member checks would be helpful.
At key points in the research, therefore, I asked the participants for feedback regarding my
interpretation of the data and for confirmation that the personal information I used was correct.
One participant corrected personal information, but that was the only suggestion I received. Five
participants discussed the results of some preliminary analysis with me, but none suggested
additions or revisions.

Since ESOL students are well known for their deferential manner toward teachers, I was
concerned that the students might be reluctant to disagree or correct my transcriptions or
analysis. Teachers are highly regarded in most of the participants’ countries of origin, and it was
reasonable to assume that the respect they accorded me was due, in part, to their background;
they seemed to extend that same deference to me as the researcher, complying with my requests
to interview and to tape classroom activities and accepting my initial analysis. It is also true that
I was not a “neutral, objective researcher” (Pierce, 1996, p. 573) to the study participants, for I was their teacher, a friend, and an advisor, as well.

**The Study Sample**

This study was based on an intact classroom of students. Rather than using a random selection of students, I reasoned that an intact group provided an effective way to track participants across time and space. The sample selection was purposeful (Merriam, 1998), therefore, and the sample met several criteria: participants were students in a class I taught, they had a high level of English fluency, and their attendance was stable.

First, because I chose to conduct the study in my own class and take on the dual role of teacher and researcher, the participants had to be students in a class I was scheduled to teach for two quarters. Second, the students needed a level of English fluency that would enable them to reflect on and to talk about their experiences with me and with each other. The enrolled students had either passed placement tests in reading, writing, speaking and listening or had successfully completed the prerequisite Level 4 course, so I was confident that potential participants could understand the intent of the study and make informed decisions about participating. Third, the advanced ESOL class had a history of stable attendance. Classroom attendance records from two previous academic quarters showed that students regularly attended and that the attrition rate was very low for an adult education class.

At the end of class, on the first day, I presented information about the study and handed out a tentative schedule of individual and group interviews, classroom observations, and audio and videotaping. I explained the data collection methods in detail, including the significance of voluntary and anonymous participation. The hand out reiterated what I had presented in the meeting, in the consent form (Appendix A).
I asked every student to take the handout and talk it over with a trusted friend or family member, before agreeing to be a part of the study. It seemed important to provide the handout and ask students to wait to sign the accompanying consent form, thus allowing them time to think over and make an informed and non-pressured decision to join or not. Although several students were ready to sign the consent form that day, I asked them to take the form home, to talk with someone and to bring it back to the next class. I followed the same process each time a new student joined the class.

Two aspects of the ESOL classes at West Coast College had an impact on participation in this research project. First, because classes operate on an open-enrollment basis, students can enroll in classes at any time during the first seven weeks of a ten-week quarter; consequently, several students joined the class and became participants after the initial group interview. Some students also left before the final group interviews took place. Second, students may re-enroll in ESOL classes for up to three quarters, as long as they demonstrate progress toward the course outcomes. As a result, several participants reenrolled in the class for the second ten-week quarter. This aspect of the ESOL program, mixing the more experienced students with newcomers, provided a nice match with the learning theory that informed this study.

During the first quarter, 15 of 19 students returned their signed consent forms and chose to participate in the study. Of those 15 participants, all attended regularly enough to schedule an interview, take part in taped classroom activities, or participate in a final interview. In the second quarter, seven participants continued with the study; five of them re-enrolled in the Level 5 ESOL class, and the other two enrolled in regular classes on campus but took part in the individual and final group interviews. Eight new students joined the class in the second quarter, but only three of them elected to join the study.
Demographic information about the students who did participate is provided in Table 3.1.

The information includes pseudonym, country of origin, age, and sex, length of time in the United States, employment status, and marital status for each.

**TABLE 3.1**

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Age/Sex</th>
<th>Key Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mari</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>44, female</td>
<td>5 years in US; Volunteers at son’s school; Husband is Japanese-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiromi</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>42, female</td>
<td>11 years in U.S.; Volunteers at daughter’s school; Husband is Navy enlistee, American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumi</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>45, female</td>
<td>4 years in U.S.; Housewife; Husband is Navy enlistee, American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>42, female</td>
<td>2 years in US; Job hunting; Married to Navy enlistee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saren</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>29, female</td>
<td>3 years in U.S.; Nursing Assistant; Husband is businessman, Taiwanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QuiQui</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>37, female</td>
<td>12 years in U.S.; Attended the Sorbonne, now in Computer Science; Husband is art instructor, American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.K.</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>19, male</td>
<td>Refugee; 4 years in U.S.; Works at Sears; Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Country of Origin</td>
<td>Age/Sex</td>
<td>Key Descriptors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyan</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>39, female</td>
<td>5 years in U.S.; Plans to study LPN; Married to Navy enlistee, Puerto Rican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosalinda</td>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>48, female</td>
<td>Waited 12 years for U.S. immigration; 1 year in U.S.; Accountant; Husband is Filipino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>43, female</td>
<td>18 years in U.S.; Nursing Assistant; Husband is Navy enlistee, American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cece</td>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>34, female</td>
<td>11 years in U.S.; Plans to study LPN; Husband is Navy enlistee, American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>25, male</td>
<td>1 month in U.S.; Scuba diving instructor; Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adel</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>23, male</td>
<td>2 months in U.S.; Waiter; Wife is Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kateryna B.</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>51, female</td>
<td>2 months in U.S.; Homemaker; Met American husband on-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kateryna P.</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>38, female</td>
<td>5 years in U.S.; Homemaker; Husband is Russian immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niko</td>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>27, male</td>
<td>Refugee, 1 year in U.S.; Plans to study Fire Science; Wife is American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3.1 CONTINUED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Age/Sex</th>
<th>Key Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>32, female</td>
<td>1 year in U.S.; Psychology professor in Colombia; Husband is Navy enlistee, America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federico</td>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>57, male</td>
<td>20 years with US Navy; Retired; Wife is Filipina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that four students in the first quarter class and five students in the second quarter chose not to participate in the study. As a result, 15 out of a total of 19 students participated in the first quarter of the study, and 8 out of a total of 13 students participated in the second quarter. For instructional purposes, the non-participants were not treated differently from the students who participated in the study; however, in my role as researcher, I was careful to honor their decision not to participate. Pair or small group activities in which they participated were never taped, and they were not interviewed; consequently, their perspective regarding the community experience has not been captured in any of the data sources. Table 3.2 provides a breakdown of enrollment, participation, and carryover during the study.

TABLE 3.2

BREAKDOWN OF ENROLLMENT AND PARTICIPATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrolled Students</th>
<th>Declined to Participate</th>
<th>Participants in Study</th>
<th>Carryover from First Quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Quarter</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Quarter</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**In Their Own Words**

Encapsulated profiles, such as those listed in Table 3.1, are useful, but limited; they cannot disclose much about the unique perspectives and backgrounds of the participants. In order to provide a more personal glimpse of the students who participated in the study, ten samples of writing are presented in this section. These excerpts were chosen from among several classroom-writing assignments.

**Mari, Japan**

Do you wish that your child [could] be a bilingual? If somebody asked me this question when I gave birth of my son, I definitely would say “yes.” But I’m not sure if I say the same answer now. Being [the] mother of a bilingual child is not easier than I thought. What I had thought first was that I wanted him to be what I wanted to be. After growing up, it’s not so easy to pick up other language like native, so I envied him that he could be a bilingual without any effort. In spite of my satisfaction, he said sadly one day: “Mom, I want to be a complete Japanese or complete American.” It made me quite shocked. Even though he was a child, he [was] caught in the middle of two cultures and questions his identity. It was a problem I’d never faced myself so I didn’t know what to say for solving his anguish of a heart.

**Hiromi, Japan**

Learning is fun to see my progress and to understand that thing that is new to me. On the other hand, it would be a frustration if I couldn’t get it or I have a complex. I had a complex when I moved to a higher level from lower level in ESL. All students I had met in new class seemed smarter than me. The class materials were harder than I used to see. At the time, I strongly felt a lack of confidence. But when I think of the first time that I started ESL, I even didn’t have any confidence to write a sentence. I still make many mistakes, but it is OK because I now definitely see my progress. Someone said that when you learn a thing, you will learn that
there are more unknowing things. However, I know that I learned in ESL wasn’t only English. I learned friendship, kindness, and confidence to speak.

Kumi, Japan

I never thought I was going to marry with someone from another country. We never know what will happen in our life. One thing I was always concern about, “Can I live in the United States for the rest of my life?” Because I love Japan, and I have my parents and my sister in there. After we moved to the United States, first, I felt lonely, but my husband was really supporting me. Even now, he is supporting me very much. So now I try to not think about, “Can I live here for the rest of my life?” And I try to make myself busy.

Erika, Japan

My plan is getting a job. Getting a job is my goal, but I feel that I’m stuck right now. Because I am trying to get a job as a floral designer, but it seems difficult. I don’t see any advertisement for that kind of position. So, I’m also thinking about getting new career such as teaching Japanese at school or getting a medical nurse assistant license. I don’t know what I want to be yet. I need to find out about myself. It’s about time to move out of ESL 5!!

Saren, China

My life couldn’t be more interesting after I started to live in the US. I was raised in a communist country and have a father who is a communist; I married a Taiwanese man whose father is Kuomintang and I immigrated to a capitalist country which is an enemy that I had been told since I was little. I found that I have chosen a husband who really likes to argue and never gives up. He has lived in a capitalist country for so long and became a half American, but I am still “drugged” or brain washed by communist ways my husband believes, and I don’t think so. Just because I am living in capitalist country, I should not give up all my beliefs. Maybe it is more interesting for him to have a wife who is stubborn to keep her beliefs.
**Qui Qui, Taiwan**

A middle-age woman stands in public naked. She isn’t young anymore. She lost her shape and her confidence. Such a shame! This woman could describe my situation completely. I am 41 years old woman and lost my basic, basic tools of expression – language. My family moved to America 18 months ago. In this new environment, I tried very hard to have a chance meeting people and practicing my English. Most of the people I meet are very friendly, but I still feel the tension when I open my mouth to talk. Because of my accent, people need open their ears and try very hard to understand what I am saying. I believe that I am not naked completely, but still bare foot after 18 months. I know if I keep working, I’ll be good someday. My long-term goal is I could talk without translating from Mandarin and talk just like I breathe, without being aware.

**N.K., Vietnam**

I am greatly influenced by both Vietnamese culture and American culture. The reason for that is because I came to this country as a teen-ager, about 15 years old. At that time, I knew and experienced so much of the Vietnamese culture to lose it. I will not lose it because it’s a part of who I am. At the same time, I’d encountered the new and popular American culture. It influenced me a great deal especially when I just started to develop my own personality, my way of thinking. It doesn’t bother me much to be in between two culture. In fact, I don’t even think about it. I just happen to be a product of two great cultures.

**Dyan, Puerto Rico**

Our culture began a long time ago… Columbus came from Spain, and the island produced a new mix of races- Mestizo, Mulatto, and Zambo. With the conquest of America, our culture suffered, and we had to adopt and accept new American customs, even the language and politics. Today, Puerto Rico is not independent; we receive federal support from the US that has
helped us to develop economically and to improve our education system. Somehow, we are Latin Americans still seeking our roots and identity. We have African music, the Spanish and English language and indigenous Indian food. I want to be a good English speaker and have the opportunity to change my life. For example, I would like to be part of my community and not feel different and apart from them. Therefore, I want to go to college and study a career as a Practical Nurse. In my viewpoint, I think a good education and training can build self-reliance and self-esteem in our lives. It will help me to have more knowledge and meet other people like me that have come here to make a new life. This country has given me many good things, so now I want to take advantage of all these opportunities and do something important in my life and for the community.

*Adel, Mexico*

The harder you work, the bigger the reward. I believe in that because I was 19 years and I arrived in the US with lots of dreams to make them come true. The first thing helped me was my desire to learn English and get a job. I started as busboy in a Mexican restaurant in September 20 and attending school as well. I realized ‘Speaking English’ meant to me in this country. Living in this country without speaking English is like being in the ocean and without knowing how to swim. The second reason was courage. When you see people believe in you, and say good things about you. For example, when I start working and school at the same time, was a little hard, so I read during my breaks and made the exercises that really helped me a lot. At first it was frustrating because it was hard but my manager saw me try to learn. The third reason was finally see results of your struggle. I would like to say that actually being waiter is not the end of my goals, but I consider it good and I will keep going to get something better day with day.
Cece, The Philippines

One of my main goals is to be able to communicate better with my family, relatives, and friends, in order to have a good relationship with them. These contains how to articulate the words better as I speak, pronunciate the words clearly, speak with more confidence and express my thoughts accurately, to gain good comprehension in following directions or instructions when given, and to develop my interaction skills as well. Next, is to use these skills to pursue some education, then when I accomplish the program, speaking/listening skills will help me to qualify and seek my ideal pursuit. The last goal is to utilize this knowledge in working with other people in the community. I would like to do some volunteer work at School with small children or perhaps, do tutorial work for some people who just came her in the United States that have very little knowledge in speaking of English.

Data Sources

This study used multiple sources for data collection. 13 individual interviews and three group interviews were conducted over the course of the study. Participant writing was collected from essay assignments, goal statements, and peer evaluations of in-class speeches and group presentations participants. Classroom activities, including sentence-combining exercises, speaking and listening activities and group discussions, were audio taped. Field notes from classroom observations were collected, and after-class debriefing notes were generated, as well. These sources are summarized in Table 3.3.
TABLE 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA SOURCES</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Source</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Individual Interviews | Conducted between January and April
Approximately 1 hour each
13 interviews
Audio taped
Transcribed by researcher
90 double-spaced page |
| Group Interviews | 1st conducted first week of study; 10 participants
2nd conducted last week of study; 4 participants
3rd conducted last week of study; 4 participants
Audio taped
Transcribed by researcher
76 pages |
| Student Writing | Collaborative writing, essays, goal statements, e-mail, peer assessment
60 pages |
| Classroom Activities | 5 classroom activities, audio taped
16 pages
Transcribed by researcher
5 speeches (not audio taped) |
| Field notes and debriefing notes | Hand-written during classroom observations
38 pages
Transcribed by researcher |

**Data Collection and Handling**

During the 20-week-long study, I collected data from individual and group interviews, student writing, classroom activities, and classroom observations in the form of field and debriefing notes. I chose an ethnographic approach to data collection because of its compatibility with the community of practice perspective (Patton, 1990). The purpose of ethnographic data collection is to examine and describe the interactions within a culture and to capture the interaction great detail; the community of practice perspective is also. These data sources
allowed me to examine the interactions within the classroom community from different perspectives, so that a case study could be constructed (Marsick & Watkins, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994).

**Individual Interviews**

Interviews are considered to be a primary method of data generation for qualitative researchers, and they can provide the research participants’ emic perspectives. Since I expected the individual interviews to provide background information about the participants, reveal their learning experiences in the classroom, and confirm or expand on observational data, it was important to ask questions that would generate useful data. To many researchers, interviews are communicative events created by interviewers and respondents together, and their meanings are contextually grounded (Mishler, 1986). As communicative events, they are culture-specific speech events (Briggs, 1986); therefore, I enlisted the help of four people who were fluently bilingual in English and four other languages (Japanese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Chinese). These collaborators provided feedback about the clarity and cultural sensitivity of my interview questions.

A total of 13 individual interviews were conducted over a period of 20 weeks. Prior to each interview, participants were given a copy of the questions, and each interview was scheduled at the convenience of the participant. All of the interviews took place in my office, were conducted in English, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed, by me, within a week. A semi-structured interview format and interview guides were used in this study, which helped to keep the interview focused but allowed for unanticipated questions and responses (Patton, 1990). 90 double spaced pages of individual interview data resulted. Appendix B provides a list of the questions used in the individual interviews.
Group Interviews

A total of three group interviews were conducted during the study. The first group interview was conducted at the beginning of the study, in the first week of class. Nine students participated, and it lasted for 45 minutes. Its purpose was to capture three kinds of information: students’ reasons for enrolling in the course, their experiences as novice English speakers, and their expectations for the course. Because this interview took place before most of the students were familiar with me, and I wanted them to feel as relaxed as possible, I decided not to facilitate the interview. Two participants volunteered to moderate the interview. Although two students volunteered to facilitate in my absence, one ultimately took over; she operated the tape recorder, read each question, and answered first. With each question, the students followed that same order, and they answered in the same order, too. I transcribed that interview the same week.

Two group interviews were also conducted at the end of the study; one was conducted in May with four participants, and one was conducted in June with four participants. Although everyone was asked to participate, work and family schedules prevented all but eight participants from attending. Each participant was given a list of questions prior to the interview, and each of the interviews was audio taped and transcribed between June and July; a total of 76 double spaced pages resulted. Appendix B provides a list of questions used in the group interviews.

Student Writing

Writing included collaborative grammar and sentence skill work on the whiteboards, essays, goal statements, e-mail correspondence, and peer assessment. Because writing instruction and practice were important parts of the curriculum, essays were written every week on a variety of topics, evaluated and revised. E-mail correspondence was voluntary in the class and used to communicate about assignments, attendance, and information sharing. Students also
provided written feedback on impromptu and planned speeches for their peers. This data resulted in 60 pages of original or xeroxed student writing.

**Classroom Activities**

Five pair or small group activities were audio taped and transcribed, and five individual speeches were observed and assessed. I chose these ten activities because of the variety of interactions and the different foci they represented. Of the taped activities, one involved two students working together on a sentence-combining assignment, and the second and third were small group discussions. The fourth activity was a listening and speaking pair practice, and the last activity captured a small group creating questions to ask a mystery guest. I transcribed each of the audiotapes within a week, resulting in 16 double spaced pages. Unlike the individual and group interviews, the classroom activities were difficult to transcribe in their entirety because of noise and muffled voices; some comments were unintelligible and made the interactions difficult to analyze. I did not tape record the speeches because the tape recorder made students nervous.

**Field Notes and Debriefing Notes**

Field notes provided a running account of what happened in the classroom, and my intention was to capture what I saw as the students worked alone or together. Written by hand, my field notes were often as short as one page; after class, I transcribed the field notes.

In the beginning, my notes were inconsistently descriptive and reflective; as the study progressed, however, they captured more of what I heard, saw, experienced, and thought in more detail. Since communication routines often differ across cultures (Goldstein, 1995), observations in the classroom provided an opportunity to familiarize myself with how participants talked about their learning experiences, and how they talked to each other and to me.

Classroom observations were complicated by my roles as both instructor and researcher; therefore, I relied on debriefing notes after each class to help me capture my thoughts and
recollections of classroom interactions. The debriefing notes were made at least twice weekly; sometimes those notes were composites of two classes. Except when student appointments or committee meetings interfered, debriefing notes were audio taped or typed directly onto a computer disk following the class. The total of field and debriefing notes was 38 pages.

**Data Analysis**

According to Marsick and Watkins (1997), “Case studies are not meant to produce crisp, focused rules of thumb; on the other hand, the stories they contain often speak more meaningfully to the reader than do hypotheses stripped of context” (p. 147). The ultimate purpose of my analysis was to create a meaningful understanding of the case data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). To accomplish that, data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for grounded theory research. Merriam (1998) recommends this method for case study research.

Because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory have adopted the constant comparative method of data analysis. (p. 159)

The analysis for this study involved an iterative process that began after the first group interview and continued through individual interviews, classroom observations, readings of student writing, and transcriptions of interviews and classroom activities. As I began the analysis process, I allowed the conceptual framework to provide the initial three categories for comparison. Those three categories were the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire.

Beginning with the first group interview, I followed these steps in the analysis process:
1. After transcribing the data set, I created a file on my computer and labeled it as an individual interview (II 1, II 2, II 3), group interview (GI 1, GI 2, GI 3), classroom activities (CL 1, CL 2), or field and debriefing notes (FN 1/23/02, DN 1/30/02).

2. On my first pass through the data, I was ready to chunk everything into three categories according to the characteristics of a community of practice: the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire.

3. After chunking the data into three categories, I created a matrix that allowed me to inductively code each piece of data.

4. After that, I compared comments by the participants within particular data sets and against other data sets, looking for instances that identified emerging themes within each category.

5. Coding the data involved several passes through each data set looking for significant themes.

6. When I was unsure about which category to place a piece of data in, I made notations in the left hand margin of the hard copy.

Data from all the various sources was eventually compiled into a single data set. All data were transcribed into a single document consisting of 280 pages.

Validity

One of the fundamental concerns with qualitative research is the confidence with which researchers can write about what they have seen and heard (Glatthorn, 1998). Since there is no objective truth with which to compare research results, the concept of validity addresses the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87). In this study, my intent was to provide unique interpretations of the ESOL classroom and the interactions among the participants. As a result,
the study’s validity will rest on the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the inferences I made from the data.

Gee and Green (1998) point out that what is needed is “a way of examining the individual-collective relationships that constitute the ‘local’ opportunities for learning” (p. 159). Their analysis of discourse across different contexts resulted in three elements of validity: convergence, agreement, and coverage. These three elements constitute validity for them because it is highly improbable that a good many answers to different questions (i.e. data from different sources), the perspectives of different ‘inside’ and ‘outside” observers, and additional data sets, will converge unless there is good reason to trust the analysis. This, of course, does not mean the analysis is true or correct in every respect. Empirical science is social and accumulative in that investigators build on each other’s work in ways that, in the long run, we hope, improves it. It does mean, however, that a ‘valid’ analysis explains things that any future investigation of the same data or related data, will have to take seriously into account. (p. 159)

In an effort to ensure internal validity, I invited bilingual collaborators to read over and comment on the appropriateness of my interview questions. I also used multiple sources of data for triangulation; I was able to use comments from individual and group interviews to check against what I observed in the classroom. I also tried to have member checks of all the interview data and my initial analysis. Four students were interested and willing to read over their interview transcripts; of the four, none had any suggestions regarding omissions or misunderstood comments. In the final interviews, the participants seemed less interested in the research process and ‘looking back’ at their experience in the classroom.
My Role as Teacher-Researcher

As with all qualitative research, it is through the relationship of the researcher to the participants and the data that the study is accomplished (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I was both the teacher of record in the classroom and the sole researcher; I played an active leadership role in the day-to-day activities in the classroom, and I was also the primary means of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Of particular help to me in preparing for this inquiry was Wilson’s (1995) experience and reflection on teacher research. She reminded me of several important considerations: (a) The challenges of doing research in our own classrooms should not be taken lightly, (b) the skills of teaching and doing research can help us examine what is happening in the classroom in different but complementary ways, and (c) teacher researchers can conduct useful inquiry and act ethically at the same time. In this section, I will discuss those dual roles and the impact that my research had on teaching and the impact of my teaching on the research. Both roles were beneficial and problematic, and their impact on my relationship with the participants and how I conducted the study was significant.

First of all, conducting research in my own classroom allowed me to observe and reflect on what was happening in the classroom in the context of the community of practice model. As a researcher, I was attuned to the life of the classroom in ways that I missed when I was only a teacher; I paid far more attention to students as they arrived, as they talked with each other during breaks, and as they left at the end of class. This kind of involvement deepened my understanding of the students I taught. Combining roles forced me to pay attention to so many more of the interactions in the classroom than I normally attend to and seemingly insignificant comments among students were suddenly on my radar.

Through those interactions and comments, I learned much more about the participants in the study than I would have had my relationship to them been only that of a classroom teacher.
In the individual and group interviews, the participants shared personal information, their experiences as immigrants, and their perceptions of learning and being adult students, and I had the time and the focus to listen to them. No manner of classroom activity could have provided that systematic, in-depth glimpse into their personal and social identities.

In addition, through listening to and transcribing audiotapes of classroom activities and individual and group interviews, I learned much more about the interpersonal interactions among students, and I gained critical insight about my own pedagogy and its impact on students. I noticed more about how the design of the curriculum and classroom arrangement fostered or constrained interactions among students.

Furthermore, the classroom activity tapes and the interview tapes revealed a great deal about students’ language-in-use that would have normally gone unnoticed. Usually, the ephemeral and fleeting nature of spoken language makes it difficult for language teachers to notice anything more than broad patterns of speech among a large number of students. Because the audiotapes allowed me to key into the spoken interactions of students more frequently, and more systematically, that knowledge helped me provide additional language support in the writing classroom.

On the other hand, the dual role was also problematic, and there were a number of tensions associated with being a teacher and a researcher at the same time; certainly my role as teacher affected my role as researcher, justifiably so. There were a number of professional challenges and technical difficulties throughout the study. My classroom observations, for instance, were frequently interrupted by the needs of the students. Since my foremost obligation was to the learning needs of the students, at those times, my default role became that of the instructor, and my observations were cut short. My research responsibilities became a secondary
priority, and I was forced to try and recall what had happened after the fact, when the class was over.

Another problem arose with occasional technology glitches. Microphones failed to pick up the audio portion of a videotaped classroom session and an audio taping of an activity during another class session. Had I been just a researcher in the classroom, I could have turned my full attention to fixing a problem with electronic recording equipment. However, when the table microphone and the video equipment stopped working, I was forced to choose between my teaching responsibilities and my research agenda.

Although I recognized some of these tensions at the beginning of the study, the full effect did not become apparent to me until after the study ended, and I recognized a pattern of interrupted and sometimes incomplete field notes, as well as missed opportunities to collect data. Many of these difficulties can be attributed to my inexperience as a researcher and to anticipate and make contingency plans; some of the difficulties can be attributed to conscious decisions to make teaching a priority over research.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of a community of practice in an adult ESOL classroom. This chapter presents the findings from the study and is organized around the three characteristics of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which guided the study. These characteristics—the negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire—are listed in Table 4.1, along with five major themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Findings Related to the Negotiation of a Joint Enterprise

A joint enterprise is more than just the activities of a particular community; according to Wenger (1998), the enterprise encompasses what members do and how they do it over time. The varied ways in which members participate in the community and how they define what they do together reflects the negotiated dimension of a joint enterprise. Over time, members of a community come to recognize a shared classroom practice through the experiences they share and their attempts to make those experiences meaningful.

An analysis of the data for this study produced two themes related to the negotiation of a joint enterprise in the ESOL classroom. First, and at the beginning of the study, students began the course with similar goals but no shared classroom practice. Second, the evolution of a shared practice was characterized by confusion and discovery. Both findings are temporally related, in that they capture the ways in which the students thought about their situation when they first entered the classroom and how their ideas evolved over time. According to Wenger,
## TABLE 4.1

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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“Defining a joint enterprise is a process…as generative as it is constraining…a resource of coordination, of sense-making…” (1998, p. 82).

**Theme 1: Students Began the Course with Similar Goals but No Shared Classroom Practice**

At the beginning of this study, on the first day of class, 15 students were enrolled in the course. Except for five students (Mari, Saren, Kumi, Erika, and Hiromi) who knew each other from my class the previous quarter, the students were strangers to me and to each other. An initial group interview that took place in the first week gave students their first opportunity to get acquainted. In that interview, and in the context of interview questions about their motivation for enrolling in the course, students talked about their current communication problems. While some students focused on specific situations that were troubling and gave details about how those situations affected their self-confidence, others were more general.

*My level of nervousness is very high. We have so many troubles in understanding, in listening.* (Kateryna, Russia)

*I want to be ... less nervous when I speak English in front of people.* (Kumi, Japan)

*I wish I didn’t have to always worry [that] I say something wrong...I don’t have to repeat....* (Saren, China)

*I don’t think I speak perfectly, but I would like to. When I think about speaking Japanese, I don’t feel so nervous. If I say something wrong, I can change it. But in English, I don’t know what word is perfect to express my thinking. Mentally, I think “Did I convey my thought?” I want them understand exactly....* (Hiromi, Japan)

Conversing with native speakers was intimidating for these students. The intense concentration, the recall of vocabulary and form, and the humility that is required for listening to and speaking a developing language is exhausting and anxiety producing. Nearly everyone in the class spoke some English every day; some of them were married to Americans and could only talk with a spouse in the new language. Yet each of them had some fear of saying the wrong thing or making serious communication errors.
In addition, immigrants often find themselves identified solely on the basis of their English language and literacy abilities. Most native speakers will have no knowledge about an immigrant’s first language or culture, yet before immigrating to the US, Kateryna, Kumi, Saren and Hiromi had lived successful adult lives in their native countries. They held jobs, had high school or university education, and were mothers or wives. They functioned quite competently as adults in a number of roles before they immigrated to the U.S. In the US, however, they perceived themselves as partially defined by their English language ability. The language barriers they faced were often frustrating and discouraging, leading to more anxiety and less confidence.

Hiromi and Kateryna explained what it was like for them.

*When I was a child, I could ask “Why? Why? Why? I don’t feel like ashamed asking. Now I am adult. I should know common things. I think, “Should I ask this stupid question?”* (Hiromi, Japan)

*Now I feel myself so stupid, and sometimes I begin to laugh, sometimes to cry.* (Kateryna, Russia)

To some degree, every student had experienced a loss of equilibrium. Like Hiromi and Kateryna, they could no longer count on the kind of language fluency that their first language gave them, and with that fluency, the knowledge of cultural norms for interaction. Like Saren and Kumi, feeling stupid, ashamed, or anxious were common experiences for these newcomers to the US.

Another commonality among the students was their focus on improving English for purposes outside the classroom. Initially, only one student indicated that socializing or making new friends was her reason for enrolling in the course; no one else mentioned anything about needing a social experience or an opportunity to make new friends among their classmates. Only
one student identified classroom communication skills, improved academic skills, or a ‘good grade’ as goals: *Myself, I come to the class to get something new I didn’t know.* (Hiromi, Japan).

Even though several students were taking other courses at the college or planned to in the future, none of their comments reflected a concern about what the classroom experience or their new classmates would be like. Instead, they were concerned about what was happening in their interactions in the community or with their families because those interactions caused anxiety and negative consequences.

*I had [a] car accident, and I had to explain what happened to the police officer, and it was very hard. If the police officer asks me a question, I can answer the question, but explaining everything by myself is very hard.* (Erika, Japan)

In spite of the fact that she had handled the situation, alone and without help from her husband, Erika was disappointed because of the outcome. She was convinced that the citation was in error, and she was convinced that her level of fluency prevented her from explaining well enough for the police officer to get the truth.

Saren had concerns about her own comprehension and fluency in English.

*For me, the most difficult situation [is] talking on the phone about some serious problem like [a] credit card or bank or something like that. I’m always afraid I didn’t explain myself very well, and they get the wrong idea.* (Saren, China)

Anxiety about being misunderstood and the consequences of being misunderstood were common concerns among these students. They worried about communicating in the grocery store, on the telephone, and with their families; they feared making mistakes that could create financial and personal problems.

The commonalities reflected in these personal statements did not escape the students, either. As one student followed another in the interview, they signaled their common plight with pronouns such as *we* and *our*. Sometimes students would preface their comments with phrases such as “*I agree with...*” or “*Like she said...*”.
The beginning of a shared classroom practice took shape as students shared their language problems and their goals. Their comments showed how focused everyone was on future communicative competence and self-confidence outside the classroom. And although the students weren’t yet engaged in a common endeavor in the classroom, their commonalities established a basis for working together in the classroom on a variety of communicative activities.

**Theme 2: The Evolution of a Shared Classroom Practice was Characterized by Confusion and Discovery**

The evolution of a shared classroom practice was characterized by confusion and discovery. Because most of the students and I were strangers to each other, there was much to learn about working together in the classroom. For example, their understanding of what the class would be like and how it would function was limited because most had little or no experience in developmental writing or speech classes in the U.S. In addition, ten different languages and as many culturally learned ways of interacting were represented in the classroom, so students had very little knowledge about each other’s background. Also, collaborative learning and fewer teacher-fronted activities were unfamiliar to many of the students. As a result, these students had to discover not just how to write and speak more fluently and accurately, but how to meet my expectations and how to work with other students.

Initially, students were relatively quiet, passive, attentive and very respectful. They were uncertain about what to do and how to do what I expected. Each student started the course with a blueprint, of sorts, in the form of my syllabus and their previous learning experiences, but only five students really knew anything about my teaching style or my expectations. Students were generally content to let me run things and tell them exactly what to do. They were content to let me take the lead, including matching students for pair work, assigning students to small groups,
calling on students after they raised a hand, and letting them know when they could take a break or leave the class. Field notes show that at first, when asked to find a partner for a pair activity, only a handful of students did so. They hesitated to choose partners and preferred that I do it for them, and when I asked for volunteers to put their work on the whiteboard, only the students from my previous class raised their hands. (Field Notes)

Finding ways to work with each other in a multilingual and multicultural classroom was challenging, too. With seven different first languages and unfamiliar accents, students often struggled to understand each other’s pronunciation and meaning. Interactions in the classroom required intense concentration and a willingness to work at creating meaning. Asking someone to reiterate, clarify, and restate became common occurrences in the classroom and indispensable to negotiating meaning with each other.

Sometimes, hard to understand her pronunciation. A first, I don’t really understand, but then I ask, ‘What did you say?’ (Kumi, Japan)

When students worked in pairs and small groups where I couldn’t monitor their communication and comprehension, they had to rely on their own assertiveness and other students’ willingness to work toward successful communication. There were plenty of blank stares, false starts, and repetition in the classroom, but even shy students, like Kumi, were invested in their own learning and willing to push themselves beyond their comfort zone.

Cultural and personality differences were more challenging in the collaborative environment. Students came with different lived experiences and with different expectations; students like N. K. and Kumi were shy, but they held opinions about what was happening and shared them with me. Students like Niko, Federico, and Cece were outgoing and often shared their opinions in front of the whole group. Because of these and other differences, finding meaning in what they did together required negotiation and patience. For some, the differences were relatively unimportant; for others, the differences were disappointing or disagreeable.
When he tried to establish a classroom friendship with other students, Niko, for example, discovered that some students preferred a social distance different from his own.

*Some students in the class are not friendly, and they keep to themself. I try very hard to... talk with somebody and know them. They are pretty hard to get in conversation. I don’t know why. I tried with N. K. a lot to talk, but he wants to keep that space.* (Niko, Kosovo)

To get along, some students had to figure out how to work with others when preferences and personalities clashed. Clara found another student’s style of interaction, during editing exercises, to be offensive, even as she acknowledged that he had good intentions.

*But some other students ... may jump on you, “That’s wrong, erase it!” So it’s more like the way . . . they approach it...I don’t think [have] bad intention, I think they really try to help you.* (Clara, Colombia)

Another area of confusion and discovery had to do with students finding out how to work with and for me, balancing their own expectations for learning with mine. They had to align their expectations of communicative competence with mine, to a great extent. Because the class focused on productive, as well as receptive skills, students were challenged to make sense of new and sometimes confusing styles and conventions of writing and speaking.

As students worked through some of their confusion about what we were doing and how they could participate and contribute to the experience, there was evidence of an investment in and accountability to the endeavor. Dyan, for example, noticed when tacit rules weren’t followed: “[I]mportant to come every day...” “When someone comes in late, I lost focus.” Kumi reflected her own sense of responsibility to a classmate and group member who had been absent for an important presentation planning session: “She can call me, but she didn’t. I will not do that to her, but still, I help her in the next class.”

The confusion that students experienced when they were new to the class and unfamiliar with each other lessened over time. As activities and relationships within the classroom took
shape, participation changed. In the beginning, when most students were strangers, their common connection was their struggles with the language outside the classroom. Over time, students discovered more commonalities. In spite of their tenuous connections at the beginning of the study, students began to discover how much they really had in common, not only in their struggles as non-native English speakers, but also in their efforts to become more fluent speakers and writers of English in the ESOL classroom. Their positioning as marginal English speakers in an English speaking community, their similar experiences with the language and the culture, and their investment in the ESOL class provided common ground and helped students identify a common purpose for being in the class.

Initially the identified goals were more personal than academic. Students focused on their frustration, anxiety, and personal needs; by the end of the course, the focus had shifted, and the dynamics of the classroom, the interdependence of the students, and their opinions about the process were more significant. As they become invested in the joint enterprise of the classroom, their experiences become more group focused, and awareness of others increased.

*When we [are] doing some activity, we talk to each other. We talk about how we learn, so we found ... have the same problem, and we understand each other.* (Saren, China)

Saren referred not just to her own learning but also to a shared competence that existed in the classroom. As a joint enterprise took shape in the classroom, through our daily routines, the common language we used, and the collaborative and cooperative activities, students could identify with and recognize a shared practice. A shared practice was possible because there were opportunities to participate in both planned and unplanned discourse and because students were invested in what we were doing: they worked with each other, they came every day, they participated, and they adapted to confusion, frustration, and difference.

The community of practice developed gradually. Students engaged with each other, adapted and responded to the activities, and willingly participated. They learned how to ask for
and give advice, share information, help each other, ignore each other, complete the work, make their own understandings work. They developed connections, if not friendships. They created familiarity by sharing the work, talking about the work, sharing personal information, using the same conventions and discourse. They learned how to communicate with people whose accent and grammar were difficult to understand; they learned how to get work done in spite of the language difficulties. They learned to do all these things in interaction.

Only as the classroom experience took shape did students begin to focus on present experiences, present competence, and present goals. Only as they began to align themselves with the classroom experience, did they have a shared practice with which to identify. It was in the process of learning about each other and learning how to work, that a shared practice developed in the ESOL class.

Findings Related to Mutual Engagement

Mutual engagement highlights the relationships among members in the community, including the ways in which members engage with each other and establish those relationships in their pursuit of a joint enterprise. In a community of practice, these relations are complex and reflect a wide range of interactions and multi-functional relationships among the members (Wenger, 1998).

An analysis of the data from the study showed two themes related to mutual engagement: social and academic identities took shape in the interactions among students, and students helped create conditions for learning through their collaboration with each other. These themes show how classroom relations and relationships contributed to a shared classroom practice.

Theme 3: Social and Academic Identities Emerged in the Interactions Among Students

ESOL students who gathered the first day of class had mostly tenuous connections with each other. A few were acquainted from the previous quarter’s class, others shared countries of
origin and native language, and a few shared their connection to the Navy or their marital status. For those who participated in the initial group interview, the connections of shared language needs and feelings of anxiety became apparent. Over the next two quarters, those tenuous connections blossomed for many, and social and academic relationships developed out of the continuing interactions with their classmates. The relations in the classroom were complex; relationships were often positive, but sometimes they were contentious. There was harmony, and occasionally, there was conflict. The interdependent nature of the classroom activities highlighted students’ participation in a variety of social and academic roles and relationships.

As students spent time together before and after class and as they worked together in pairs and groups, social and academic identities emerged. An emphasis on collaboration provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their strengths in areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and their interests and competencies became more noticeable.

Monday and Wednesday classes were focused on speaking and listening activities, so students listened to each others’ impromptu speeches and gave feedback, shared their opinions in small group discussions, helped each other with pronunciation problems, and compared their progress with each other.

Tuesday and Thursday classes focused on grammar, sentence skills, and essay writing, so students read each other’s essays, edited each other’s work on the whiteboards, and created short paragraphs together.

Students noticed and acknowledged the language fluency of others as writing activities went up on the white boards and impromptu speeches were given. Students were able to display their sentence skills on the white boards, their pronunciation and vocabulary when they gave speeches, and their writing ability when they shared essays. Students like N.K. and Cece began to be identified as the ‘best speakers’ in the class.
I think Cece is the best speaker. She is married to an American man so she has the opportunity to speak. N.K. is also good at English, and Mari is also good at English. (Rosalinda, The Philippines)

Cece speaks very well, very clear. N.K. I’m not sure because he speaks a little fast. He knows a lot and speaks very well. (Clara, Colombia)

But Cece has more vocabulary because she has taken other classes and has interacted with other students who speak English well, and N.K., too. When I listen [to] Cece speaking, she speaks beautiful. (Dyan, Puerto Rico)

That competence was somewhat intimidating for Kumi, a quiet and humble Japanese woman.

Can I tell you the truth? Sometimes I am kind of afraid of Cece. Just, she uses a lot of word I don’t know, so I try to ask, but I have to ask her a lot of time. (Kumi, Japan)

Although N.K., Mari, and Cece had plenty of problems with their English, they seemed less self-conscious than many students and more assertive about asking questions or asking for clarification. N. K. was actually quite shy, but he and Cece, in particular, were willing to make mistakes in front of their classmates. In addition, these three had experiences with the language that others did not; N. K. had just finished four years at an American high school, Mari was taking pottery classes at the college, and Cece was married to an American and had lived in the US for 11 years.

Field notes show that students had opportunities to share their practical knowledge and outside interests, too. As her classmates discovered that Dyan liked to learn new words and could spell quite well, her fellow students began soliciting her help. Early in the first quarter, when students asked me for correct spellings, I always responded; as time passed, however, I began to throw it back to the students. Dyan frequently responded. Other knowledge surfaced as students organized and gave presentations in class; Saren organized an in-depth presentation explaining how she and her husband applied for and got a home mortgage, including all the problems they had encountered. For the next few months, she advised fellow students and
helped one classmate with her paperwork. Erica taught the class to make origami animals, and several students then taught their own children. Kumi often brought her delicious chocolate chip cookies to class and graciously shared her recipe when asked. (Field notes)

Students also became known for the help they gave. The help, in and out of the classroom, might have been providing transportation, calling to check on absent classmates, sharing jokes, giving compliments, or responding to requests. Because the students were seeking greater communicative competence, knowing who was willing and likely to offer help was important information to have. Even when they weren’t in small groups together, it wasn’t uncommon for students to seek out a classmate who could help with spelling, a vocabulary word, or the correct grammar.

_Sometimes, like N.K., he’s wonderful writer, but he’s wonderful helping you out. So, I usually go over, and he will check my spelling, and he [doesn’t] make a big deal about how to write._ (Clara, Colombia)

_N.K. talks and always listens. He has a good balance._ (Rosalinda, The Philippines)

These roles and the relationships among classmates were possible because of the interdependence in the classroom and students’ willingness to participate in a public way. Because the interactions were frequent and varied, students recognized who spoke clearly, had a good vocabulary, or could help. They came to know who was a good writer or speaker. They came to know who was a helpful classmate, both inside and outside the classroom. They knew who was a friend to whom. Students had additional opportunities to demonstrate their competence when I gave up some control in the classroom; instead of always answering student questions about spelling, vocabulary, or pronunciation, I redirected the questions to the whole class. As students took advantage of these opportunities, I continued to turn the questions back to the group.
Not all interactions were harmonious or agreeable, however. Students also interacted closely and often enough to experience conflict and disagreement and to decide whom they liked, disliked, or trusted. Relations in the classroom were usually outwardly positive, yet personalities and communication styles sometimes clashed. This happened between Clara and Niko and was significant enough to her to tell me about it in her individual interview.

*I always will remember that experience. If somebody ever laugh at me, I would not talk too much to that person. That happened to me with N. So I [do] not talk to him anymore, or I try to talk to him in short sentences.* (Clara, Colombia)

Although it’s unlikely that Niko meant to be offensive during their editing activity, Clara perceived his behavior as lack of respect, and it was an affront to her. She was very sensitive about her developing skills in English, so from then on, Clara worked with other students and accepted critical feedback from them, but she refused it from Niko. Niko’s comments were received as extreme rudeness, and she did remain aloof with him. When both of them volunteered, along with two other students, to work on the student writing publication, Clara arranged it so that she and Niko rarely worked together.

There were also tenuous relationships among classmates, as when students missed many classes. Because of her schedule of classes and choices she made, QuiQui attended pretty inconsistently and did not feel connected to her classmates. She recognized that she was missing being a part of the group because she wasn’t present.

*I’m not really come all the time, so I don’t really know them well.* (QuiQui, Taiwan)

Since relations in the classroom were fluid and multi-faceted, students could be peripheral in some contexts and central in others. In the second quarter, students often asked Federico and Niko, two of the most fluent and confident students in the class, to answer questions or partner with them. Yet, as males, Federico and Niko were excluded from some of the informal communities in the classroom, as when the married women and mothers in the class
talked during break time. The Japanese women were a tight group outside the classroom and often talked in their first language during the breaks; this may have felt exclusionary to Niko, but I also observed occasions when the women switched to English and included other students in their conversations (*Field Notes*).

Participation differed among students; cultural differences, access, and personalities all seemed to play a part in the fluid patterns in the classroom. Not everyone, new and old alike, felt encouraged or able to participate in front of classmates. Quiet people sometimes felt left out in small groups, according to Kumi, when matched with more confident or talkative classmates.

*Some people may want to talk more, but some quiet people really can’t talk, don’t have a chance to talk.* (Kumi, Japan)

And some, like Erika were uncomfortable with the social aspect of collaboration.

*I am uncomfortable with greetings like, “Hi, how are you?” After that, I don’t know what to say. I’m always thinking, “What can I say?”* (Erica, Japan)

**Theme 4: Students Expanded Their Focus from Individual Needs and Solo Performance to Include Relationships and Interactions with Others**

Over time, the individual needs and solo performances of the students expanded to include relationships and interactions that helped support their own and other students’ learning. They began to choose their own partners and offered useful suggestions to each other. They developed an awareness of the group process and became more knowledgeable about each other’s competence and strengths. These were often acknowledged publicly.

*We usually sit close. When I talk to her I feel very comfortable. We both try to understand each other.* (Kumi, Japan)

*In beginning, M. speak very slow, and it was difficult to understand, but now she speak very clear and soft.* (Dyan, Puerto Rico)

Group work at the board and pair work at their tables provided opportunities to help someone else. As the study progressed, participants were able to build their knowledge as they
negotiated for meaning with each other; collaborative activities provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding or knowing in action. This is best illustrated in a taped exchange between N.K. and Cece, as they worked together on a sentence-combining activity.

Cece (reading a sentence): “Women have a sharper sense of taste and smell; therefore, they hear better than men.”

N.K.: Oh, hold on a second.

Cece (repeats the sentence): “Women have a sharper sense of taste and smell; therefore, they hear better than men.” Does it make sense?

N.K.: No.

Cece: It doesn’t?

N.K.: Okay, it’s not, it’s not because they have a better sense of taste. Taste has nothing to do with hear, and smell.

Cece (interrupts): And smell has nothing to do with hear. They are totally different.

N.K.: Yes. So here, some kind of sense, too. You know what I’m saying?

Cece: This is difficult.

N.K.: Yes, it is confusing.

Cece (loudly, to the teacher): This is confusing, Maggie.

Cece: Oh, I know. “Women have a sharper sense of taste, smell, and hear.”

N.K.: Hearing?

Cece: “Women have a sharper sense of taste, smell, and hearing.”


Cece: I know. Make it simple.

N.K.: Yeah. Now we’ve got it.
Several aspects of this exchange are important. First, their interaction illustrates how one peer can provide effective guidance for another’s learning. In this pair, N.K. was the more experienced student, and he was willing to help Cece work through the grammar and vocabulary to create a meaningful story. At several points, he provided learning assistance in the form of prompts, to help her complete the task with him. In the process, he was able to reinforce his own learning. Second, N. K. and Cece engaged in several different kinds of talk: talk about content, language, and process, as well as the spontaneous aside to me, the teacher. They communicated about what they found significant in the task and in their negotiation. The objectives for the task provided direction, but it was what mattered to the two that shaped what they gleaned from the activity.

In another taped pair activity, one student read a short paragraph posted outside the classroom and returned to tell, in memorized chunks, what the paragraph said. His partner had to listen and write down, word for word, whatever she heard or thought she heard. Miguel and Kumi were partners, one a Spanish speaker and the other, a Japanese speaker. Coming up with a completed paragraph took a considerable amount of time as Miguel read, memorized and then told Kumi what the paragraph said; Kumi could only listen, ask him to repeat, and write.

*Miguel:* Larry was very lucky in business.

*Kumi:* You say berry? (Clarification)


*Miguel:* He had thirteen stores and thirty clerks.

*Miguel:* He had thirteen stores and thirty clerks. (Repetition)

*Kumi:* Okay. He had thirteen. You mean number thirteen?

*Miguel:* Yes, right. He had thirteen stores and thirty clerks.
Kumi: Okay. He had thirteen stores and thirty clerks. Clerks with ‘l’. (Confirmation)

As Miguel spoke and Kumi wrote, they were forced to negotiate for understanding using several strategies: confirmation and clarification requests, in which a listener believes she understands what has been said but wants to make sure; comprehension checks in which a speaker checks to be sure her listener understands; and repetition, in which a speaker repeats or restates what he has said in order to repair an unintentional mistake. Kumi, in particular, could take nothing for granted; she had to confirm her own understanding each time Miguel told her what to write.

The exercise, for pronunciation, listening, and speaking practice, required continual negotiation because of the limitations placed on each partner; however, interactions like these reinforced learning. When learners actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning, they made their experiences personally meaningful and comprehensible, and they improved their language learning at the same time.

Students provided feedback to each other after short speeches and group presentations, mixing at least one positive comment with at least one suggestion for improvement. Sometimes, the feedback was given as a debrief; sometimes, I collected the comments and compiled them. Rosalinda assessed her classmates with these positive comments: “Looked at audience, good posture, explained well, good pronunciation.” She had these suggestions for improvement: “Improve pronunciation, stop dancing around.” Assessing each other required a different kind of language competence, for it forced students to pay attention to how they and others communicated, as well as what was communicated.

If you can’t pronounce the word correctly, the other person can’t understand you. (Dyan, Puerto Rico)

Some students, when invited, suggested several ways in which I could help them reach their goals. Again, Rosalinda offered the following:
What does Maggie need to do? (1) Encourage everyone to make impromptu speech or unprepared speech. (2) Read books or magazine s and discuss the topic to the group. (3) Give us a referral to a company or school or organizations offering a job. (4) Group games help to make ourselves comfortable with each other. (5) Make us write a conversation just like what she did last week where we make a conversation between a teacher and a student. (Rosalinda, The Philippines)

Students also received feedback about their work from me, of course. From my perspective, the most constructive comments were intended to focus their attention on meaning, and how their ideas would make sense to a reader or a listener. Knowledge of grammar points and sentences skills was important in the context of being able to successfully put their ideas into writing, in some case for me, the teacher, and in some cases for an unknown reader. Preferring that students begin to identify their own mistakes in the process of self-editing, I often prompted students with a reminder of the need for coherence. To Niko, who handed me a draft of a writing assignment, I wrote: “Your topic sentence tells me that you are going to write about being a father, but in this paragraph, you write about being a mother. Aren’t you off-topic? Can you think of additional words that will connect this sentence to your topic?” (Field Notes)

Students enacted a variety of roles, both academic and social, and in so doing helped themselves and other students improve their English skills. They acted as more expert academic peers, at times, and provided authoritative academic knowledge, assistance, and assessment. Students also enacted roles of more expert social peers and provided resource information and assistance. Students developed relationships with each other and with me, and they came to know and identify each other based on those interactions. In this study, several roles emerged as students interacted and contributed to each other’s learning.

Findings Related to the Development of a Shared Repertoire

A third characteristic of a community of practice is the shared repertoire created as members contribute to the joint enterprise through their mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). Reflecting a shared history of engagement, the repertoire encompasses all the ways in which
participation is available in the community, and it encompasses what is materially produced as well as what is symbolic to the enterprise.

An analysis of the data showed one finding related to the development of a shared repertoire: students contributed to the communicative practices of the classroom. In the ESOL classroom, our repertoire included routines for getting work done, a special vocabulary to talk about writing and speaking, stories about each other, social activities, and a variety of resources from the classroom and campus.

**Theme 5: Students Shaped the Communicative Practices of the Classroom**

We began the course the first quarter with my syllabus and lesson plans and plenty of transparencies, markers, and dictionaries. Initially, my presence was all encompassing since my instruction set a tone and direction for the students. I initiated and redirected most of the communication and activities in the classroom, and I usually decided when it was time to review, begin new material, or wrap things up. Much of what we accomplished in the classroom can be subsumed under three broad categories of practice: the social, the linguistic, and the pedagogic. Routine communication in the classroom developed around information that was needed for pragmatic purposes. Information had to be gathered because of federal and state reporting requirements, including daily attendance, new student orientation and fluency appraisals, course registration, and progress documentation in the form of summative assessments. These requirements were routine tasks for which I was responsible, but they also provided opportunities for language use in the classroom.

For example, over time, students knew a lot more about each other than I did about them, and it seemed that someone always had information regarding someone else’s life. “Kumi sent me an e-mail; she’s sick and won’t be in class today.” “Rosalinda is late because her daughter must go to the dentist.” If students couldn’t get through to me, they could always send messages
through their classmates. Not everyone participated, however, and the level of participation varied. In the first quarter, the two Russian women and QuiQui attended infrequently and finally stopped coming altogether; they were peripheral to most of the life of the classroom, and none of the other students contacted them.

Other practices developed because our program policy of continuous enrollment meant that new students could join the class through the sixth week of each quarter. Initially, I asked the students who were doing well in class to help the newcomers.

_The new students usually ask, so [I] tell them, ‘We learn punctuation, we do speeches.’ And then they have some idea...when they don’t understand something; they come to you and ask._ (Dyan, Puerto Rico)

_Sometimes they didn’t understand what they should do, so I explain[ed] what they should do. When I was a newcomer, I asked the same question to other students because sometimes I [didn’t] know._ (Saren, China)

Besides their assistance to me, Dyan and Saren filled a valuable helping role for fellow students. The more experienced students shared their knowledge with newcomers, ensuring that useful information was passed down the line.

Students took responsibility for reminding me about break times and calling to each other when class was about to begin; students shared information about how and where to register, and they handed out dictionaries and thesauruses before essays were written in class. Students shared stories about Erika taking aerobics with Madonna, Federico traveling around the world, and Miguel scuba diving and riding a bike to class, even when it rained (Field notes). Other parts of the program were maintained in the same way; the quarterly end-of-term party, where certificates of completion were handed out and accomplishments celebrated, was possible because students organized the potluck and shared their music, dance, and customs with students, staff, and faculty.
Another category of communication was linguistic practices. Learning to write in a new style required not only a new set of grammar and sentence skill competencies, but a new discourse, as well. Learning to give speeches and make presentations required new vocabulary, special phrases, organizing strategies, and pronunciation tips. A common language was needed in the classroom, so that we could understand one another. I needed comprehensible language for mini-lectures or in the evaluation of student writing and students needed that same language for their work in pairs, small groups, and at the whiteboards, as well as in their editing of each other’s writing and giving feedback to each other’s speeches.

The discourse we used included phrases that the students could employ to discuss grammar points in the context of time (correct verb tense; subject/verb agreement; prepositions), sentence skills in the context of making comparisons, describing, or showing cause and effect (punctuation; connecting words; parallel construction), and organizing strategies in the context of writing essays and short paragraphs (point of view, reader, audience, tone). There were special words and phrases to discuss speaking skills, including stress, rhythm, intonation, volume, and tone.

Students also adopted linguistic structures that helped them to organize their speaking and writing for better communicating. Students took to this new way of doing and talking about our work in the classroom to varying degrees. During an editing activity in a small group, Clara made a point about sentence structure by going to the whiteboard and writing two examples of a sentence – one correct, one incorrect. To her classmates, she pointed out that the punctuation was important because it helped convey the right meaning: “It’s confusing without that comma. Do you see it?” (Debriefing Notes)

While some students adopted new words and phrases in order to talk about specific skills, others adopted new words and phrases to talk about the process of writing. In the middle of one
activity on the white boards, Rosalinda responded to a question about why she used a particular punctuation mark and conjunction in a paragraph by saying, “I added it because it doesn’t make any sense the other way.” Later in the same class period, she offered help to another classmate who was trying to make sense of his sentence: “I think you must ask yourself why you choose this word or that word. Maybe try both and pick the best.” (Field Notes)

When Dyan approached me with a question about her first draft of a writing assignment, she asked if “the reader will understand what I wrote here?” (Field Notes) When these students adopted the discourse of writers for their own use, and when they incorporated the aspects of a new writing style into their own writing, they were identifying themselves as members of a community of writers. Dyan and Rosalinda were also acknowledging the social dimension of writing: the presence and importance of an audience.

This kind of linguistic spillover showed how students could appropriate a new discourse for their own purposes, and it established a new way to communicate with each other and construct meaning. Students could discuss more than just grammar points and sentence skills; they could talk about the process of writing, as well.

Those who had formal education with English came to the class with knowledge of discrete grammar skills but with little experience employing them in the context of a developmental writing course. Furthermore, most of these students came from cultures where writing styles differed considerably from our American academic or business style. For them, the quality of one’s writing was found in the volume of words, the rhythm of the sentences, or the hidden meanings contained in the text. Good writing required a more circuitous style of communication, and in some cases, students had been taught that being too direct was disrespectful or tactless.
Adapting to the discourse and conventions of academic writing and public speaking was challenging for many of the students. The Japanese women, for example, had been schooled in a more abstract and nuanced style of writing, while Dyan and Clara, who spoke Spanish as a first language, had been taught to write in a storytelling fashion that allowed the listener or reader to guess at meaning and topic. Clarity of language was a difficult concept to master for students used to writing and speaking in a less direct style. Their introduction to the style of writing and speaking in US academic and business contexts meant using clearly worded introductions, main ideas with topics and controlling ideas, transition phrases, and conclusions. Because the goal of the course was not to impose a prescriptive format on student speaking and writing, but to guide students to learn a new way to organize their communication, they were able to incorporate aspects of what they already knew about the language with new forms and functions.

Classroom communicative practices developed around pedagogy, too. Collaborative activities, including peer editing, displaying work on the whiteboards, and small and large group practice, provided continual opportunities for interaction. In the beginning, students displayed their writing for others to see and comment because they were asked to do so. A few students, especially those new to the class, weren’t confident enough to put their work on the whiteboards, and a number of students were reluctant to offer suggestions and corrections to other students’ work. As the weeks progressed, however, making mistakes, discussing them and fixing them was what we did in the classroom.

*We go to the board and write ... and we all get to fix it. Of course, students can fix my sentences....and I am fixing somebody else. That means everybody else is making mistakes, too. (Hiromi, Japan)*

Their comfort level with peer collaboration was expressed in a variety of ways. For example, students began asking each other how to spell a difficult word, to check homework assignments, to clarify directions, explain a grammar point, or edit someone’s writing.
Pedagogic practices impacted community building in another way. Through direct instruction of specific skills such as grammar points and sentence syntax and explicit instruction of writing conventions, students developed a common knowledge base that facilitated communication about the process of writing and the finished work they produced. Although students who were experienced in ESOL classes were accustomed to collaborative activities, most students in the class came from educational systems that favored lecture-based, teacher-fronted classrooms. At first, those students were uncomfortable when mini-lectures ended and group practice began, and mid-quarter formative evaluations always came back with one or two requests for more lecture time and worksheets.

By the end of the course, Saren, who had been educated in Mainland Chinese schools and university, approved of the group activities.

_There is more interaction in classes here, so have to change attitude. It is much better to work with others for practicing English. Group work forces moving and getting to know each other. There is a big difference from China where everything is individual, formal and serious._ (Saren, China)

Whether pragmatic, linguistic, or pedagogic, the practices of the classroom became a source of cohesion the more the students participated in them. Common communication practices developed and were sustained because students were willing to participate in them. The classroom practices became a source of cohesion because students worked together to improve their English and develop their communicative competence. Because students brought their own experiences and perspectives to the classroom, they were able to build on that prior knowledge. Not all students had the same level of participation, but student participation inevitably changed for those students who showed up every day. The classroom provided a context for the routinization of the communicative practices we all shared: small talk at the beginning of the class, mini-lectures on grammar points, work at the whiteboards, feedback in
writing and speaking activities, shared information, presentations and impromptu speeches, and editing activities.

You... have a chance to meet all kinds of people. I have learned a lot from my classmates, as well. Talking to them, I... learn to practice my English .... I try to talk with them every time I am with them. (Hiromi, Japan)

When I mingle with my classmates, I am very open to them. Yes, and I am very respectful to their ideas, to who they are...not just thinking about myself...because I can learn just as much from them as they can learn from me. (Cece, The Philippines)

Everything that was part of the repertoire reflected both student participation in the community and reifications of that participation. Participation was evident in the interactions among students and in the connections they had with each other. In turn, they represented their participation through the essays they produced, the sentences they created on the whiteboards, and the presentations they put together. In addition, their participation was reified through an understanding of an activity, as when Cece told her partner, “We should do it this way.”

Students Comment on Their Learning

By the end of the second quarter, students had participated in an individual interview, a group interview or both. Asked to reflect on their language use, they had the following comments:

Now I’ve changed. Now I’m not afraid to talk with somebody. It was really difficult for me to talk to other people if I don’t know them very well. I am learning for myself. I want to learn and that’s why I become a student. Yes, it is hard, but you know what you are doing. We have the same goal. We are all immigrators. (Saren, China)

Saren’s speaking and writing skills really had changed, and she could see it in her final in-class writing and in the presentation she made about how to apply for a home mortgage. For most of the two quarters that she studied ESOL, Saren took advantage of every opportunity to practice at the white boards, work with more proficient students, ask questions, and complete assignments. Her attendance in the last few weeks had fallen off, and she was working full-time as a dental assistant. She enjoyed her work, in part, she told me, because her co-workers were
impressed with her English fluency. They were amazed, and some of her classmates were too, that she understood so much about American humor.

*My co-worker...say I am more American. Not only speaking, those jokes. I pick-up those jokes.* (Saren, China)

Saren was a popular student and seemed to know all her classmates each quarter. In one of the last group interviews, Kumi, N. K. and Rosa all planned to keep in touch with her.

*At the beginning, it took a lot to say something. Now I am more comfortable...I guess I know everybody is in the same situation."* (N.K., Vietnam)

N.K. was incredibly proficient when he enrolled in the class the first time. He had graduated from the local high school after only four years in the U. S., but he wanted to perfect his English before he transferred to a university. Like a number of his classmates, N. K. was a serious student, and his shyness didn’t prevent him from asking questions in class. From the first quarter to the second quarter, he worked very hard on organizing his writing and writing more creatively, but it was the speaking activities that challenged him the most.

*So like you get to know a little more better, get a little bit faster in listening and reading, even writing better.* (Niko, Kosovo)

Niko had joined the class in the second quarter with quite good skills in speaking and listening, and like N. K., he had already picked up a lot of slang. His goal had been to refine his English, so that he could enroll in one of the professional/technical programs at the college. In class, he was eager to participate, and his enthusiasm for every kind of learning opportunity was energizing for me.

Another student who was perceptive about her own learning process was Hiromi.

*I think I am learning a lot, maybe like how do I talk to people or how do I put a sentence together. I have been writing a lot. When I came to this class first time, I couldn’t even write two sentences, couldn’t write paragraph, but now, I can write one page or two pages.* (Hiromi, Japan)

Hiromi had already taken the college placement test and was enrolling in the first
developmental English class when she shared this in her individual interview. She was another student who took advantage of every opportunity to get feedback on her writing while she attended the class.

*I know people get better, and they’re more comfortable*  (Erica, Japan)

*I don’t feel like I’m getting better. Speaking in ESL class is much easier, but not outside.*  (Erica, Japan)

Erica was enrolled in the class both quarters during the study, but her attendance was sporadic because of her children’s health problems. She didn’t seem to make a lot of progress in writing during the first quarter, but she did improve significantly in her speaking during the second quarter. The presentation she made, teaching us how to create floral arrangements, was a huge success among her peers in the class. In Japan, she was a professional floral designer but had to give that up when she married her American husband and moved to the U.S. Erica enrolled in my class the next quarter, but no other Japanese students enrolled. That quarter was a turning point for Erica; she wrote letters, sent e-mails, and decided to apply for a part-time job with the school district. When she asked me to write a letter of reference for her, I was pleased to be able to recommend her without reservation.

*I don’t know if it’s better or not, but I’m getting used to talk. More comfortable. I don’t think it has improved. Well, I can’t tell.*  (Mari, Japan)

Mari’s comments, like other students, reflected ambivalence. She hadn’t been able to attend classes very regularly, but she was feeling confident enough to volunteer her time in her son’s Japanese language class at the local middle school. I could see her progress and her increased confidence; she could only see how far she had to go to become the bilingual speaker she envisioned.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings and implications of the study. The chapter is divided into six major sections. They are (a) summary of findings, (b) discussion of the findings related to the negotiation of a joint enterprise, (c) discussion of the findings related to mutual engagement, (d) discussion of the findings related to the development of a shared repertoire, and (e) conclusions and implications for practice and research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of a community of practice in an adult ESOL classroom. As proposed by Wenger (1998a), a community of practice defines itself along the following three dimensions: The negotiation of a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and the development of a shared repertoire. Wenger’s framework proved very helpful as sensitizing concepts in the case study, guiding the analysis of the qualitative data. The findings show that aspects of all three dimensions were present in the ESOL classroom to some extent, and the following themes resulted from the study:

• Theme 1: Students began the course with similar goals but no shared classroom practice.
• Theme 2: The evolution of a shared classroom practice involved struggle and discovery.
• Theme 3: Social and academic identities emerged in the interactions among students.
• Theme 4: Students helped create the conditions for learning through their collaborations with each other.

• Theme 5: Students shaped the communicative practices of the classroom.

These findings correspond to the three dimensions that define a community of practice and which Wenger suggests provide coherence to a community through its practices. Theme 1 and Theme 2 point to individual and contextual factors that contributed to the negotiation of a joint enterprise and the evolution of a shared practice in the ESOL classroom. Students were able to move beyond their individual goals and cultural expectations to arrive at common understandings about the classroom experience. Their willingness to participate in the activities of the classroom and to appropriate a new discourse, as well as their investment in learning were important factors in the development of a shared classroom practice.

Theme 3 and Theme 4 show how mutual engagement was manifested in the classroom. The students interacted, for concentrated periods of time and on a regular basis, in structured and spontaneous ways, to help themselves and others reach their individual goals. Over time, and from those interactions, they formed a variety of working relationships in the classroom and constructed identities that fostered their own and others’ learning.

Theme 5 addresses the development of a shared repertoire in the classroom. Through the relationships and interactions of the classroom, students created a great many opportunities to use and develop their English language skills. Students participated in and shaped the communicative practices of the classroom, utilizing a variety of resources along the way. In the process, their communicative competence and confidence changed.

Each of the themes is discussed in the following sections, according to the three characteristics of a community of practice.
Discussion of Findings Related to the Negotiation of a Joint Enterprise

From the data, two themes emerged that related to the negotiation of a joint enterprise. They were (a) students began the course with similar goals but no shared classroom practice, and (b) the evolution of a shared classroom practice was characterized by confusion and discovery. These themes are supported by data showing that a shared practice evolved over time, required a level of consensus among the students, and required shared understandings. Because they are so closely related, these themes will be discussed together.

According to Wenger (1998a), one of the characteristics of a community of practice is the negotiation of a joint enterprise by its members. The joint enterprise evolves as members of a community of practice establish common understandings about what it is that they do together, how this relates to what they already know, and what new knowledge they will need to participate and achieve their goals. The joint enterprise requires a level of consensus about these common understandings and a willingness to be accountable to the practice and other members of the community.

In this study, individual and contextual factors such as the willingness of students to participate and the collaborative nature of the curriculum contributed to the evolution of a shared classroom practice. Some of those factors included students working in pairs or small groups on a variety of language activities, trying out new skills, giving and receiving feedback, holding opinions about what was happening, and socializing during the breaks and outside class. The willingness of students to attend class and interact with their classmates showed a commitment to the classroom community as well as a commitment to increasing communicative competence.

Common understandings of what we were doing in the classroom and common ways of talking about what were doing were negotiated as students worked together. The evolution of a shared classroom practice was a complex process that entailed accommodation, adaptation, and
appropriation because the diversity of expectations, cultural backgrounds, and personalities made figuring out how to work together quite challenging. N.K., Rosalinda, and Cece were able to adapt to my style of teaching and to the different cultural conventions of many of their classmates. Over time, students like Hiromi, Dyan, and Saren were able to experiment with a new discourse that allowed them to talk about their writing and speaking. In spite of the weaknesses in their English and language differences among them, N. K., Mari, Dyan, and Clara found ways to demonstrate their developing learning and Kumi, Miguel, Erika, and Saren provided knowledge and help to other students.

At the beginning of the quarter, students were unfamiliar with each other, with me and with the curriculum, but over time, they came to share and participate in a number of common features of the classroom. Finding out about each other’s goals and sharing background information allowed students to establish some common ground. Collaborative activities helped students discover how their classmates learned, what their classmates were good at, and how their classmates could help them. Socializing, during breaks and before and after class, helped students get acquainted and provided an effective way for students to share useful information and their knowledge of community resources. Learning a new discourse and the practices that accompany it contributed to the understandings that helped a shared practice evolve. As evidenced by the data in this study, students used shared knowledge to make sense of what they were engaged in, and it was an essential aspect of their learning. As Breen (2001), Kegan (2001) and Wenger (1998a) have found, the development of community depends on a high level of common ground or shared knowledge.

According to Wenger (1998a), a shared practice is a key component of a community of practice; it emphasizes what people do and how they give meaning to their interactions. Practice reflects a shared domain of interest and a shared commitment. Like the evolution of a concept
(Brown, Duguid, & Collins, 1989), a practice is always under construction because new situations and activities and new understandings require new negotiations of what it is that people need to do. In the ESOL classroom, a shared classroom practice unfolded as the students came to class each day, participated in collaborative activities, learned about each other, and appropriated new ways of writing and speaking.

Discussion of Findings Related to Mutual Engagement

Two themes emerged that related to mutual engagement. The two themes were (a) social and academic identities emerged in the interactions among students, and (b) students helped create the conditions for learning through their collaborations with each other.

First, social and academic identities emerged in the interactions among students. In a community of practice, identities reflect the ways in which members are connected or affiliated with the group or enterprise (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a), so identity is always understood in relation to others and in relation to situations, rather than being just an internal or individual construct. As such, identities are socially constructed, like meaning, and according to Lave (1993) “developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter…. ” (p. 65).

The data show that social and academic identities developed within the classroom community as students interacted with each other and participated in the shared practice. Students enacted identities as competent speakers or writers, as knowers of grammar or spelling, as resources for community information, and as helpers. These identities were recognized in the classroom, as evidenced by comments in the individual and group interviews and the choices students made for partners and group members. Their peers recognized N. K., Cece, Mari and Niko as excellent speakers, Federico as nearly bilingual, and Hiromi and Saren for their
emerging fluency. Erika, Kumi, and Saren were recognized for their practical skills, Rosalinda and Dyan for their knowledge and generosity, and Clara for her computer expertise. Students were known for their humor or outgoing personality; some students developed identities among some of their peers as aggressive, shy, and sometimes, rude.

Academic and social identities, such as those discussed above were not the only identities shared in the classroom. The students in the study had grown up in different countries around the world, and each of them had a cultural heritage that connected them to one or more communities outside the U. S. As Alfred (2005) points out, for many immigrants the learning institution is not simply a site where they demonstrate old knowledge and create new forms of knowing. Rather it is seen as a place where there is dynamic interplay between cultures, institutional structures, and agency…. Many immigrants continue to maintain membership in the nation state from which they originated…. (p. 6)

In addition to the cultural activities that I designed, students found ways to share aspects of their cultural identities with their classmates. Sometimes, that took the form of information about first languages, shared food, or pieces of history or geography. For example, students sometimes bolstered their understanding by translating difficult English vocabulary into their first language, or like Saren and Dyan, they brought food from their native country’s cuisine, or like Erika, brought cultural artifacts to talk about and share. Sometimes, students shared aspects of their cultural selves in their approach to their peers and learning, as when Kumi expressed her opinion that students who came late were being disrespectful to the teacher or that students should not answer the questions raised by other students. Dyan, who grew up in Puerto Rico, confided that she felt more comfortable with the Filipina ladies because they were not so quiet like the Japanese women.
The second theme relating to mutual engagement was students helped create the conditions for learning through their collaborations with each other. Just as members of a community of practice develop identities through their participation, they also derive meaning through their participation (Wenger, 1998a). Meaning resides in social practices and in the on-going negotiation with other members of the community; in this study, students helped create conditions for learning through their interactions with each other. Over time, collaborative activities provided opportunities for students to practice and learn a repertoire of specialized discourse, writing and speaking conventions, negotiation skills, and to develop these common understandings. There were a variety of ways in which these activities contributed to their learning.

The students in the study used opportunities in their interactions with each other to recognize breakdowns in communication, to practice repairs, and to ask for clarification and confirmation. They were able to practice these aspects of normal communication in the classroom in collaborative activities that required extensive negotiation. With plenty of opportunities to work together, even in frustrating situations, both listeners and speakers were engaging in the on-going negotiation of meaning. That is, when the students interacted, they had the opportunity to identify gaps in their knowledge, develop repair strategies, or make conversational modifications, all of which are indicators of meaning negotiation.

Research on the development of interlanguage (Swain, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978), which is a speaker’s awareness of her own language mistakes, shows that interaction with more proficient native speakers or more proficient non-native speakers is essential. As Swain found, when speakers are pushed to try new forms or to modify existing ones, language development occurs. When knowledge was shared in the classroom, through negotiation and mutual engagement,
learning developed faster because students had a chance to clarify their understanding with each other and in a different context from the lectures and explanations that I gave.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theorizing about the zone of proximal development and Wertsch’s (1991) work with situation definition and intersubjectivity illustrate how students developed competence in collaborative activities with each other. As students worked through challenging activities with each other, they contributed different understandings of what the problems were and what might be needed to complete an assignment; through this on-going process, students developed their language and communication skills. They also assisted each other as they reached common understandings of what to do and how to do it. More expert students assisted their less confident peers in a variety of situations, as when N. K. assisted Cece and provided what Bruner (1990) refers to as a scaffold for learning.

It is important to note that the students in the study experienced the classroom in different ways. Because academic classrooms are cultural experiences (Brufee, 1993; Harklau, 1999; Norton, 2001), adapting to collaborative activities, a new discourse, writing conventions, cultural differences and among students, and new teacher expectations was more comfortable for some students than for others. Some students expected a classroom in which the teacher was in control at all times, provided lectures and grammar exercises, and critically evaluated every student performance, so it took time for Saren, Kumi, and Mari to feel comfortable and productive during collaborative activities. Some students found it difficult to negotiate cultural or personality differences, so Niko, Clara, and Kumi experienced tension in some of their interactions. Students could not always understand how our particular environment could contribute to their success with English grammar, pronunciation and sentence skills.
Discussion of Findings Related to the Development of a Shared Repertoire

One theme emerged that related to the development of a shared repertoire: Students shaped the communicative practices of the classroom. The data from the study show that student participation in the communicative practices of the classroom developed over the course of the study.

At the beginning of the study, students were largely content to let me lead in all aspects of the classroom life; indeed, most students expected me to be directive in every way, in spite of feeling, as Kumi did, “like a child”. I defined tasks and evaluated their work, controlled the communication and made decisions unilaterally. I had a significant presence in the classroom during focused pronunciation practice, mini-lectures on grammar points and sentences skills, and feedback on group work at the white board.

Over time, my role in the classroom changed. When I didn’t control the flow of conversation, when students had opportunities to demonstrate their competence, and when the curriculum fostered the development of competence, students stepped in and were willing to assist each other. Over time, students began to recognize their peers as resources, both for academic and practical knowledge. Dyan became recognized as a resource for new vocabulary and spelling, and N. K. was acknowledged for his excellent speaking, for example. Cece organized a study group, and Niko, Clara and Kumi became co-editors of the student writing publication for the entire ESOL program. This recognition of expertise and the participation patterns of the classroom gradually influenced the practices themselves. Although the ESOL students came to the class with their own agency, their opportunities to learn through participation, collaborative interaction, and negotiation was fostered when I shared power and constrained when I did not.
Wenger (1998a) has pointed out that engagement is inseparable from empowerment in communities of practice, suggesting that we “make sure that participants have access to the resources necessary to learn what they need to learn in order to take actions and make decisions that fully engage their own knowledgeability” (p. 10). Meaningful participation includes the power to influence and affect what happens in the community, as some of the students in the study experienced. As the study commenced, there was more time for students to demonstrate their competence through collaborations and reflection. The classroom culture that developed was greatly shaped by the students and their interactions with each other.

Wenger (1998) has criticized the traditional classroom format for being ‘too disconnected from the world and too uniform to support meaningful forms of identification” (p. 269) and ‘focusing on mechanics of learning at the cost of meanings” (p. 266). Students were able to develop identities of competence in the study through their legitimate peripheral participation in authentic activities (Wenger, 1998). Norton (1995) has illustrated how important access is to participation, and a number of studies (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lindsay, 2000; Norton, 2001) have shown how important meaningful participation is to learning and developing competence. The classroom experience in this study provided multiple ways for students to interact and participate with each other.

**Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Research**

Three major conclusions resulted from this study. The first conclusion is that a community of practice developed in the ESOL classroom as students used English to negotiate a shared practice, to demonstrate identities of competence, and to shape the social, linguistic, and pedagogical activities of the classroom. Although students began the course as relative strangers who were focused on their own goals and future competence, we established ways of talking
about our work, ground rules for getting our work done, and patterns of interaction. Through the negotiation of that common knowledge, a shared practice evolved.

Social and academic identities also emerged in interactions in the classroom. Students became knowledgeably skillful and demonstrated that competence as speakers and writers of English, as knowers, as helpers, and as community resources for their peers. Social and academic identities were also important as they both promoted and constrained participation in the community. As in all communities of practice, students experienced the community differently. Students were central to some activities in the classroom and peripheral to others; students were also central to some groups in the classroom and peripheral to others.

The second conclusion of the study is that communities are complex systems that require careful attention. The ESOL classroom community in the study highlighted the social and contextual nature of learning for the students involved, and the classroom community promoted the development of identities of competence for many of the students. The ESOL classroom was also a site of conflict and tension, as well as harmony, and there were situations and experiences of empowerment and disempowerment, as well as diversity and uniformity. In promoting community, therefore, educators have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the rights of all students are protected, that opportunities for a variety of forms of participation are encouraged, and that diversity is valued. Recognizing the dualities inherent in a community of practice does not preclude its value in the education of adults, as long as educators do not abrogate their responsibility. As Renshaw (2003) has argued, “coming together around agreed goals, beliefs, strategies and activities in the classroom is a necessary condition for the recognition of difference and the exploration of diverse viewpoints” (p. 366).

The third conclusion is that the development of community can be an important aid to meaningful instruction in adult literacy education and can act to counter the current ‘test and
teach’ emphasis that values individual knowledge over authentic practice. One way that the development of community can aid instruction is in valuing the expertise that students bring to the classroom or develop through their participation. Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) theorizing about the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Bruner’s (1990) notion of scaffolding provide useful concepts that teachers can build into their curriculum design. Educators can also promote practice of the language through authentic interaction and meaning negotiation if they consider the interplay of situation definition and intersubjectivity (Wertsch, 1991) when planning collaborative activities for their students. The development of community can also promote students’ sense of agency in an academic context by increasing opportunities for meaningful participation and empowerment.

Currently, adult ESOL programs are being evaluated using standardized tests, and federal funding for local programs is tied to quantitative measures of learning gains. In addition, many ESOL programs use these standardized tests for only receptive (reading and listening) skill assessment instead of both receptive and productive (speaking and writing) skill assessment. The challenge of how to reflect language use as dynamic, co-constructed and situated, for funders who have little understanding of learning paradigms, is a considerable one. Educators who are engaged in promoting community in the classroom can address this situation by designing authentic assessments that will capture the essence of language use in progress and develop qualitative and quantitative methods to document the relevant learning that occurs in collaborative interactions

**Implications for Practice**

Teachers can learn to teach better by thinking of their classrooms as communities. The complex social interactions that occur in adult literacy classroom and the re-enrollment policies of ESOL programs offer several opportunities for fostering communities of practice. Re-
enrollment policies, for example, provide more experienced students an opportunity to demonstrate their competence and their knowledge of classroom practices over more than one quarter or semester. Also, continuous enrollment policies allow newcomers an opportunity to learn the ropes and move into more central roles in the classroom at their own pace. The notion that many forms of participation, including those on the periphery, are welcome in the classroom community validates individual levels of competence and confidence. This tension between planning and designing everything ahead of time or allowing for emergent experiences and generative learning is common in the community of practice (Wenger, 1998a).

Teachers can also help their students by promoting community in the classroom because collaboration and active participation reflect the interactions in real life environments of work and family, mirroring the communities that adult literacy students belong to or hope to join in the future. Designing the curriculum for this kind of interaction is possible in classrooms where teachers are facilitators of learning. Instead of a micro-managed classroom, where instructors feel compelled to make all decisions, control the majority of communication, and act as the conduit for all learning and teaching opportunities, collaborative classrooms can provide the opportunities for students to learn with and from their peers, as well as with and from their instructors. In that kind of environment, students will be encouraged to discover, to develop critical thinking and awareness, and to engage in negotiation with each other.

Teachers who recognize the value of collaboration will have to find ways to share authority with learners. Groups need orchestration, so it is important that teachers not abrogate responsibility and leave classroom groups to take on teaching and facilitation responsibilities generally. Collaborative learning experiences must be examined for the ways in which they might or might not be empowering for linguistically and culturally diverse students, especially in adult education venues.
Classroom design must also take into account the balance between actual participation in the activities of the community and mere representations of real participation. If students spend their time listening, to lectures or to other people talking, or if they spend their time reading the reifications of living activity/active learning, and participation is limited, then learning will not be as rich as it could be (Wenger, 1998a). SLA research also suggests that students develop greater language competence when they participate in meaningful exchanges, compared to listening to others talk (Hall, 1999). An input-rich environment alone is not a sufficient condition for learning (p. 140).

**Implications for Research**

The results of this study suggest several areas for future research. One area for consideration relates to my choice of methodology and how it might be changed or duplicated in future research. Conducting teacher research has distinct advantages, for no one who has spent a few hours in a classroom can understand it like someone who is a part of the classroom everyday; my presence gave me access to the life of the classroom and the relationships within in as an insider. However, managing two such significant responsibilities is challenging, and I might have been more scientific and attentive if I could have participated in and observed the classroom as a researcher only. According to Wilson (1995), a teacher who wants to conduct research in her own classroom would do well to consider how her relationship to her students shapes the questions asked and the problems investigated.

Using the same methodology, further researchers could examine other aspects of the community of practice model; legitimate peripheral participation in classroom communities could be more thoroughly researched for the ways in which centrality and peripherality are chosen or imposed. The many dualities of the community of practice model offer various opportunities for further study.
Another area of consideration is future research, using different methodologies, to examine more homogeneous classrooms. How are the classroom practices that evolve different in a homogeneous class, and how do the cultural norms that develop foster the development of community or hinder it?

Finally, it is important that teachers connect with research, whether it is conducting it alone or with others or simply reading the results of someone else’s investigation. As Cross (1996) suggests “If teachers are to remain motivated to learn how to teach, they need to be actively involved in formulating questions about how to teach and seeking the answers…. ” (1996, p. 19); she goes on to say that faculty must talk to each other about teaching and create a culture that supports professional improvement.
REFERENCES


ETS Center for Global Assessment (2004).


APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research titled Socially Situated Activity in Adult Literacy: A Community of Practice in a High-level ESOL Classroom, which is being conducted by Maggie McLaughlin, Department of Adult Education, College of Education at The University of Georgia, under the direction of Dr. Thomas Valentine, Department of Adult Education, 542-2214. I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:
1. The reason for the research is to determine to what extent and in what ways a community of practice is formed in an ESOL classroom. The benefits that I may expect from it are an opportunity to improve my English language fluency.

2. The procedures are as follows: I will attend the ESOL class, with other participants and the researcher, for one academic quarter. I will participate in at least one individual interview and one group interview, each of which will last for approximately one hour and will take place in an agreed-upon location. The classes and the interviews may be audio taped or videotaped. The research will last for an entire academic quarter.

3. No discomforts or stresses are anticipated, but I may decline to participate in aspects of the group meetings at any time, if I so desire.

4. No risks are foreseen.

5. The results of this participation will be confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. I will be able to see the responses of the other participants, if I so desire. Audio and/or videotapes may be made of the sessions and will be erased by the end of December, 2003.

6. The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at (360) 475-7313.

____________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator     Date     Signature of Participant     Date

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM. KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR.

Research at The University of Georgia which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia D. Alexander, M.A., Institutional Review Board; Office of V.P. for Research; The University of Georgia; 606A Graduate Studies Research Center; Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706)542-6514; E-Mail Address JDA@ovpr.uga.edu
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

First Group Interview

Why are you taking this class?
How will this class help you improve your speaking and writing?
What do you find most difficult about learning English?
What do you find easiest about learning English?
In the past, what kinds of activities were most helpful in learning English?
How often do you speak English outside class?
Where do you speak English?
What are the most difficult situations for using English for you?
How nervous are you in these situations?

Individual Interviews

How long have you been in the U.S.?
Where did you grow up and go to school?
Why did you move to the U.S.?
Tell me about your family and your work.
What are you learning in the class?
Why do you come to the class every day?
What do you like or dislike about working with other students in class?
What have you learned about your classmates?
What have your classmates learned about you?
Who are the best English speakers and writers in the class?

Final Group Interviews

How did your participation in this class change during the quarter?
What have you learned about your classmates?
What have you learned from your classmates?
Have you seen changes in your classmates?
What have you learned about your own learning?
What happened when someone new joined the class?
What will you remember about this class and your classmates?
Are your speaking and listening abilities better now? How do you know this?
Are your reading and writing abilities better now? How do you know this?