

**Applying Communities of Practice Theory to  
Applied Linguistics Research**

---

---

**Julia Kimura**

School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences  
Mukogawa Women's University, Japan  
Email: tua03037@temple.edu

**Abstract**

If you are reading this, as a child, you probably went to school to learn. However, as we enter adulthood, we do a great deal of learning informally after we have completed compulsory and formal schooling. Although early theories of learning fell under the quantitative paradigm, new qualitative and social theories of learning have now been proposed. Communities of practice theory can help explain how this informal learning is largely a social endeavor. This theory was developed not as a replacement to existing theories of learning, but as an alternative and complementary explanation of how learning is accomplished. In this paper, I first provide an overview of theories of learning in second language acquisition. Next, I describe these social theories of learning, focusing on communities of practice and how this theory has been applied to research in second language acquisition. I then illustrate how I am applying it to my own research on female foreign

language teachers in a professional organization in western Japan.

**Keywords:** communities of practice, second language acquisition, social theory

## **Introduction**

Learning is a social affair. When we were young, we learned from family members by explicit instruction, such as learning how to tie our shoelaces, or our ABCs, and implicit instruction, as we watch what family members do (Rogoff, 1990). When we entered school, where the end goal was to socialize us and prepare us for participation in society, learning became more structured. And finally, when we completed our compulsory education, we usually either went on to further studies, or entered the workforce. For those of us who continued to go to school, we continued to learn in a structured environment, and for those of us who chose to enter the workforce, we began learning about our new occupation through on-the-job training, and we continued to learn as we gained experience. In this less structured workplace learning environment, on the job, we learn by doing.

In this paper, I provide a general background of education theory as well as theories of learning in second language acquisition (SLA). Next, I describe communities of practice as an exemplar of social theory of learning and highlight studies which utilize this social theory in research on SLA. Then, I illustrate how I use communities of practice theory in my own research examining how female foreign language teachers participate in their professional organization. Finally, I conclude with a summary of my paper and suggest directions for further research.

## **Theories of Learning**

Most societies around the world educate their younger members by formal or informal learning, or a combination of the two. To teach our young most effectively, we must make informed decisions backed by sound research. Originally, the fields of

education policy and practice have been built on a foundation of philosophy and social science (Murphy, 2013). Murphy added that historically, the likes of Marx and Dewey shaped early thinking on education, but now in modern times, we have also drawn on four influential thinkers: Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, and Bourdieu. One of Derrida's big contributions to the field of philosophy of education was that he demonstrated the relevance of deconstructivism with respect to relevant issues in education research (Irwin, 2013). Foucault conceptualized contemporary society as a confessing society, which in has influenced reflection and reflective practices, which have now become common practices in education (Fejes, 2013). Habermas was a reluctant hero of education research (Lovat, 2013). In his new and broader theory of knowledge, he conceived of various new ways of knowing, including critical reflection and engagement. And last, but not least, Bourdieu made important contributions to both sociology and education research. He identified various forms of (intangible) capital, such as cultural, linguistic, and social capital, which work in similar ways to the more familiar economic capital (1991).

Of greater interest to education researchers, however, are his thoughts on idealistic education as well as his theory of practice. Briefly, as for the former idea, according to the Rawolle and Lingard (2013), is that a truly rational pedagogy would help to reduce inequality, but paradoxically, this would not be realized until teachers and students were recruited democratically. As for the latter contribution, he contrasted practice and habitus. According to the authors, Bourdieu refused to define practice, but from his writings, we can glean that it has to do with logic, flow and practical activities and how they interrelate over time. On the other hand, habitus is an even slipperier concept, but the authors take it to mean a collection of dispositions that allow us to engage with and make meaningful contributions to practice. In educational psychology, researchers examine theories and problems in education, such as applying learning theory to the classroom, curriculum development, and testing and evaluation (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

However, much early research in education, and in particular, second language education, was quantitative (Brown, 2004), and therefore, I would add, positivistic. Initial research focused on quantifiable test scores, response times, and stages of development. What had been missing in these numbers-based approaches was an understanding of how we view education as a social process. We can do this when we take a more reflective and reflexive view of education. We should also contextualize it and try to understand how social and cultural factors shape the field (Wexler, 2009). Wenger (1998) added that, “A social theory of learning must ... integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing” (p. 4-5). Now, new alternate and complementary social theories have since been proposed which account for the social nature of learning, and these theories attempt to explain learning more holistically, particularly among adult learners, most of whom have already completed their formal schooling. Nowadays, a range of paradigms have been employed in education research, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, to name a few.

### **General Theories of Learning**

Although SLA has been occurring for as long as members from different linguistic backgrounds have come into contact with each other, and predates writing, consistent written accounts of early SLA are scant (Musumeci, 2011). The author has also argued that initial catalysts for SLA include commerce and formal education. However, according to Musumeci (2011), the hegemonic view of the history of second language instruction has been that the grammar-translation method used to teach Latin to young, elite men was the predominant approach for centuries. In the middle of the 20th century, however, newer methods and approaches such as audiolingualism, the direct method, communicative language teaching, content-based instruction, and task-based instruction came into fashion. (Incidentally, it is interesting to note that as a *lingua franca*, like Latin since the decline of the Roman Empire, English is not the L1 of most of its users.) For more thorough and

contextualized alternative accounts of the history of SLA, see Howatt and Widdowson (2004), Kelly (1969), and Kibbee (1991).

### **Theories of Learning in Second Language Acquisition**

In the west we have tended to trace the origins of formal Second Language Acquisition (SLA) to well before the 17th century when Latin was the language of education, commerce, and religion. In the 20th century, however, French eventually took over and now English has replaced French as the new lingua franca (Musumeci, 2011). Because long ago the purpose of SLA was for comprehending written text, the more generally understood view is that the grammar-translation method was taught to students who memorized grammar rules for the sake of decoding written text in the target language. Neither oral nor aural skills were emphasized because they were not needed. Travel was much more difficult than it is today and therefore, students of the target language did not come into contact with other users. However, because of travel and technology, today people around the world need not only to deal with written text but spoken text as well. Approaches developed in the 20th century have addressed oral and aural skills. Furthermore, since the Skinner's theory of behaviorism had been developed, the implicit belief was that communicative competence could be developed through explicit instruction (Loewen, 2015).

The theory of behaviorism was developed in the 1960s and in the 1980s. In this time, Krashen proposed some influential hypotheses of learning including the acquisition-learning hypothesis (1981), the monitor hypothesis (1982), the input hypothesis, (1984, 1985, 1989), the natural order hypothesis (1982), and the affective filter hypothesis (1982). Later, the pushed and comprehensible output hypotheses (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005) were formulated as a response to Krashen's input hypothesis. Swain (1985, 1995) developed these hypotheses because even though she found that after eight years of French immersion, L2 learners' comprehension was at a similar level to L1 users', she saw that productive skills did not progress as well as those of L1 users in terms of grammar. Similarly, van Compernelle (2010) found that

with respect to acquiring pragmatic knowledge, L2 learners in French immersion were not as proficient as L1 users. Therefore, while researchers and practitioners cannot deny the importance of input in second language acquisition, it is probably a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to acquire a second language. However, Krashen still insists that comprehensible input is both a necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition. Thus, while Krashen's hypotheses have numerous critics, it is worth noting that his ideas have led to newer and more robust theories of SLA.

### **Social Theories of Learning**

Social theories of learning account for interactions among a group, which in a traditional classroom setting, includes teachers and students. This is a departure from examining learning from the point of view of educational or developmental psychology, where the unit of analysis is the individual learner. In this section, first, without going too far back in time, I provide a general overview of modern trends in SLA. Then, I outline more social theories of learning and describe how they have been applied to education research. Finally, I describe communities of practice theory as developed by Wenger (1998) and illustrate one example of its application to education research as it has been applied to recent research in SLA research, and to my own doctoral dissertation research on female foreign language teachers in western Japan.

**Communities of Practice.** There are many theories that help us to understand how learning occurs. One theory can do this from a qualitative and social point of view. Communities of practice was initially proposed as an alternative, not a competing, theory of learning. Essentially, it is a social theory of learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and it grew out of research on apprenticeships, and later, research on situated learning. Their thinking was shaped by Bourdieu, especially his concept of *habitus*, though unfortunately, the authors' explanation is woefully inadequate. Lave and Wenger first defined a community of practice

as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (1991, p. 98). Later, Lave and his collaborators saw a community of practice as a group of people who share a passion about a topic, a concern, or problem, and who increase knowledge and expertise through continually interacting with other members of the community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Developing this communities of practice theory was not a straightforward matter. Lave and Wenger (1991) were interested in how specific cases of apprenticeships led to the development and exemplification of their theory of situated learning. Later, there was a shift in the researchers’ perspective. They saw situated learning as a transitory concept, linking two primary views in which they saw learning as both a cognitive process and a social one. The researchers’ perspective later saw a second shift in which they eventually came to view learning as legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger found that the central defining characteristic of learning when viewed as a situated activity is that it is characterized by a process that the authors referred to as legitimate peripheral participation.

The authors proposed the term “legitimate peripheral participation” as a descriptor of engagement in social practice with learning as an integral part. Legitimate peripheral participation is the process of learning when viewed as a situated activity and characterizes the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice. This situatedness accounts for how we can see learning as an essentially social endeavor. Lave and Wenger emphasized that learning takes place not so much through reification of a curriculum as it takes place via modified forms of participation that are structured to open the practice to nonmembers. To illustrate an example of reification, Wenger (1998) uses claims processors in an insurance company processing incoming claims from customers. The opposing concepts of peripherality and legitimacy are two types of modification required to make full, actual participation possible. A more peripheral member gains legitimacy as he or she participates more fully. Later,

Wenger (1998) built on this work and continued to further develop the framework of the communities of practice.

**Three Characteristics.** As the concept of situated learning was refined and reformulated into what is now known as communities of practice theory, three defining characteristics emerged: namely, the domain, the community, and the practice. By domain, Wenger meant that members share a commitment to the domain and a shared competence, which distinguishes the members of the community from outsiders. This characteristic of domain community is defined by members who engage in a joint activity, help each other out, and share information. Third, the community is not merely defined by a shared interest, but also a shared practice.

**Social Theory in Research in EFL Settings.** Recently, social theory has also been applied to research on not only learners (Churchill, 2007) but also teachers of English as a foreign language (Derrah, 2017; Koran, 2014). This goes to show just how versatile social theory is when applied to second language education research. What follows in the subsequent paragraphs is a summary of the three researchers' studies.

Communities of practice theory has been applied to learners of English as a Foreign Language in a study abroad context (e.g., Churchill, 2003). In his dissertation research, Churchill examined Japanese students in a study abroad program.-relied on data from participant observations, interviews, documents, and data collected by participants. He took a post-structural understanding, and through revealing some of the local dynamics in the host home environment, he found instances in which his participants negotiated situations which would either facilitate or mitigate language learning. He therefore demonstrated how communities of practice theory can be applied to research on language learners in the Japanese context.

In his dissertation research, Derrah (2017) conducted an ethnography of communication at a private high school investigating how teachers understand their environment within

the context of changes in the Japanese education system, and even greater changes in Japanese society. However, though the focus was on the teachers, students as well as informants outside the school were included in order to provide a more complete picture. Like Churchill (2006), Derrah relied on data collected from participant observations and interviews as well as artifacts, but he also included data from three focus group discussions.

Motivation has been conceptualized as a social theory (Turner, 1987) and Koran examined EFL teachers' motivation in the Iraqi context. Koran conducted a survey of 37 randomly selected teachers from high schools (i.e., junior high school in North America), secondary schools (i.e., high school in North America), and a university responded. Koran also conducted interviews, but with how many participants was not clearly stated. The schools are all part of a single academic institution in Iraq. At a basic level, Koran explained motivation from the theoretical perspective of Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs. He then described his participants' motivation from the point of view of three theories that account for employees' motivation, namely: expectancy theory, equity theory, and job enrichment theory. Finally, he acknowledged that recent research and experience has shown that motivating workers with individual merit and incentive pay is ineffective at best, and detrimental at worst.

Koran decided to focus on two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. However, in answer to his first research question, he found that there are not only intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, but also altruistic reasons for SLA teachers to enter the profession. The second research question that Koran set out to answer was to what degree EFL teachers are satisfied and to investigate factors that kept them motivated within the institution. He found that most of his participants seemed to be satisfied with aspects of working within the institution, but difficult relations with members in administration was a common source of dissatisfaction. The author concluded that teacher motivation is related to job satisfaction and stated that he believed that a motivated teacher can have a significant influence on students' perception[s] and desire to learn.

Therefore, because teacher motivation influences job satisfaction as well as student motivation, and consequentially performance, research on teachers, including their motivations is worth examining.

Taken together, these three aforementioned studies illustrate the applicability of social theory to foreign language learners and teachers. The researchers triangulated their observations by collecting data from a variety of sources, which gives their studies depth. In the next section, I illustrate how communities of practice can be applied to my own research in which I examine foreign language teachers in Japan.

### **Female Foreign Language Teachers Learning**

In my own case study on female foreign language teachers in western Japan, I am drawing on data from six participants, including myself. We are all of European descent, we all come from “inner circle” countries, and we now live in western Japan.

By inner circle, I rely on Kachru’s (1989) definition in which he saw English in terms of three concentric circles: an inner circle comprising L1 varieties of English, an outer circle comprising ESL varieties of English, and an expanding circle comprising EFL varieties. Politically, these distinctions are salient because inner circle varieties of English carry more prestige than outer circle varieties, which in turn carry more prestige than expanding circle varieties of English. In Japan, native speakerism is rampant in job postings for English teachers (Kim & Lee, 2017) even though sometimes employers do not hire the foreign-born L1 speakers who happen to hold the wrong passport (Nakagome, personal communication). Incidentally, the native speaker fallacy is strong in Asian contexts in general (Apple & Da Silva, 2017). Similarly, some employers prefer to hire non-Japanese L2 users of English over Japanese L2 users (Hashimoto, personal communication).

Communities of practice can be applied to my dissertation research. There are exemplifications of Wenger’s three characteristics of a community of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice. In my study on female foreign language teachers

participating in a professional organization, these characteristics can be exemplified in the following ways. First, the domain is the professional organization itself. The second characteristic, community, is essentially made up of its members, who are mainly expat foreign language teachers, and in this study, I am focusing on female members, who form social relationships and get together at events that are not sanctioned (nor discouraged) by the organization. Last, the third characteristic of a community of practice exemplified is that the community is not merely defined by a shared interest, but also a shared practice. There are many activities that members can participate in, including lectures as well as social get-togethers. Therefore, the professional organization that I am researching exhibits the three characteristics of a community of practice, as laid out by Lave and Wenger and consequently, the theory is a suitable lens through which I can view the organization.

For my dissertation research, I am conducting six case studies on women, including myself, who belong to a professional organization that primarily recruits foreign language teachers. The organization is based in west Japan, and according to figures from the treasurer, approximately 30 % of its members are female. Unfortunately, this is not reflected in its leadership. Out of 20 officers on the executive committee, for the past couple of years, only one or two have been women. Therefore, I am looking for factors that foster and mitigate these female leaders' participation in activities. Communities of practice theory seems to be a suitable lens through which I can examine women participating in the union because it might be able to help me trace my participants' movement from legitimate peripheral participation towards a more of an insider status.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have provided a general background of theory in SLA and described communities of practice theory in some detail. I subsequently described other research in education and applied linguistics and then illustrated how I plan on using communities of practice theory in my own research examining how female foreign language teachers participate in a professional organization they

belong to. What I have not done, however, is provided ample background to precursors of communities of practice theory, such as research on apprenticeships and on situated learning. Furthermore, some readers may think that I have also neglected to give a sufficiently comprehensive account of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which helped shape the theory.

As a matter of fact, Wenger, one of the two developers of communities of practice theory, does not mention *habitus* in much of what he writes on the matter, and even in his seminal book introducing communities of practice theory, it is addressed only as a single footnote. Furthermore, even the precursor to Wenger's 1998 book, Lave and Wenger (1991) mention *habitus*, but they do not define this term for the reader. Furthermore, I have neglected to give an account of trajectory, which is another key aspect of this theory. There have been some studies which examine communities of practice in labor unions, however, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies using this framework to examine participation of expat professionals in an organization, which is the focus of my dissertation research.

**Directions for future research.** Although there is a growing body of qualitative education research on viewed through the lens of social theory, there remains a great deal of potential to explain the "hows" in second language acquisition both with respect to learners as well as teachers. More qualitative research on language learners and teachers employing social theory can better account for the essentially social nature of learning. Qualitative research, and case studies in particular, can help explain some outliers in quantitative research, for example. Using complementary research methods to look at problems from more than one angle can also help paint a more complete and certainly interesting picture.

### **Note**

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 19th Temple University Applied Linguistics Colloquium held at the

Temple University Japan Campus in Tokyo, Japan on February 5, 2017.

### **The Author**

Julia Kimura (M.S.Ed.) is a lecturer in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Mukogawa Women's University. She is also a Ph.D. candidate at Temple University, where she researches female foreign language teachers in Japan. She also serves as a column editor of the Recently Received column of the Japan Association for Language Teaching publication *The Language Teacher*.

### **References**

- Apple, M., & Da Silva, D. (2017). Language learning motivation in Asia: Current trajectory and possible future. In M. T. Apple, D. Da Silva, & T. Fellner (Eds.), *L2 selves and motivations in Asian contexts* (pp. 228-237). Bristol, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Brown, J. D. (2004). Resources on quantitative/statistical research for applied linguistics. *Second Language Research*, 20 (4), 372-393. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2004.002276.x
- Churchill, E. (2003). *Construction of language learning opportunities for Japanese high school learners of English in a short term study abroad program* (Doctoral dissertation). Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.
- Derrah, R. H. (2017). *Gakunen: Teacher practices at a private Japanese high school in the early 21st century* (Doctoral dissertation). Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.
- Fejes, A. (2013). Foucault, confession and reflective practices. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. (pp. 52-66). Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.

- Howatt, A. P. R. & Widdowson, H. G. (2004). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Irwin, J. (2013). Derrida and educational research. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. (pp. 171-183). Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Kachru, B. B. (1989). Teaching world Englishes. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(1), 85-95.
- Kelly, L. G. (1969). *25 centuries of language teaching*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Kibbee, D. (1991). *For to speke French trewely: The French language in England, 1000-1600: Its status, description and instruction*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Johns Benjamin.
- Kim, M., & Lee, N. S-C. (2017). Non-Japanese Asian female English teachers speak out: Dismantling white privilege in Japan. *Studies in English Language Teaching*. 5(3), 531-542. doi:10.22158/selt.v5np531
- Koran, S. (2014). Analyzing EFL teachers' initial job motivation and factors effecting [sic] their motivation in Fezlar educational institutions in Iraq. *Advances in Language and Library Studies*, 6(1), 72-80. doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.1p.72
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. (1989). We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis. *The Modern Language Journal*, (73)4, 440-464. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.1989.tb05325.x
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Loewen, S. (2015). *Introduction to instructed second language instruction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Lovat, T. (2013). Jürgen Habermas: Education's reluctant hero. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. (pp. 69-83). Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Murphy, M. (2013). Social theory and education research: An introduction. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. (pp. 3-17). Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Musumeci, D. (2011). History of language teaching. In M. J. Long & C. J. Doughty (Eds.), *The handbook of language teaching*. (pp. 42-62). Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rawolle, S., & Lingard, B. (2013). Bourdieu and educational research: Thinking tools, relational thinking, beyond epistemological innocence. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*. (pp. 117-137). Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics*, (3rd ed.). Essex, United Kingdom: Pearson Education.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Swain, M. (1993). The output hypothesis: Just speaking and writing aren't enough. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 51, 158-164.
- Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics* (pp. 245-256). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language*

- teaching and learning* (pp. 471-481). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Turner, J. H. (1987). Toward a sociological theory of motivation. *American Sociological Review*, 52(1), 15-27.  
doi:10.2307/2095389
- van Compernelle, R. A. (2010). Towards a sociolinguistically responsive pedagogy: Teaching second-person address forms in French. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 66(3), 445-463. doi:10.3138/cmlr.66.3.445
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W.M. (2002). *A guide to managing knowledge: Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wexler, P. (2009). Introduction: Three models of social theory in education. In P. Wexler (Ed.) *Social theory in education primer*. (pp. 1-43.) New York, NY: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.