Can the EFL Classroom Be Considered a Community of Practice?

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Abstract

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) has attracted interest for over two decades and has been actively re-examined from a variety of perspectives, especially in the field of education. However, limited research has been conducted into the concept of one EFL classroom-based teaching and learning community constituting one CoP. This paper discusses the potential applicability of the concept of CoPs to the EFL classroom and investigates the following question: "Can a certain number of students and their instructor participating in a group population be defined as a CoP?" The results of the study showed that considering an EFL classroom in its entirety as a CoP is possible, and an expansion of the definition of CoPs to include EFL pedagogical communities is necessary.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, higher education in Japan, EFL CoP, teacher education

Introduction

This study aims to ascertain whether a group of students, such as 30 EFL students and their instructor, can form a CoP (Community of Practice), and hypothesizes that "one classroom can be treated as a CoP." It explores how the application of Lave and Wenger's (1991) original CoP concept can be extended to language classrooms. First, previous studies that have incorporated the concept of CoPs will be summarized with an analysis of trends in the research. The conceptual construct, function, and role of the CoP, its organization and developmental stages, emerging issues in its definition, and possibilities for its use in language education in higher education institutions will be discussed. Second, the relevance of studying classrooms in the context of learning EFL at Japanese higher education institutions treated as CoPs will be considered in terms of significant implications for foreign language pedagogy.

English classes for first year university students in some universities in Japan are constructed on the basis of learners' individual levels of previous achievement in English or on their test scores. One unit of a small number of learners will take five or six different English lessons with the same classroom members each week. These learners spend most of their time as part of the same small group and learn English together. It can therefore be beneficial for teachers to try to understand how a single unit of a certain number of learners learn as one classroom community.

Literature Review

CoPs: Structure, Function, and Role

A CoP is a coming together of people with diverse interests and ideas, who have a common understanding of the meaning, goals, and roles of their activities and collaborate to implement a practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 94–100). A practice is defined as a customary behavior or activity that is socially organized (Tanabe, 2003, pp. 134–139). Tanabe (2003, p. 128) stated "a practice is something that people do by following an activity to be done in a given setting while compromising with the institution and maintaining a close mutual relationship." The following three characteristics are attributed to CoPs (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015):

a) The domain: A CoP extends beyond simply representing a community of friends or a network of connections to include those with a shared domain of interest. Being a participant in the community, therefore, implies having a commitment to such a shared domain, which further requires one to develop corresponding competences;

b) The community: Participation includes helping each other and sharing information, and allowing relationships to be forged and collaborative learning to take place;

c) The practice: Members of a CoP develop a common repertoire of resources, including experiences, shared narratives, tools, and approaches to solving problems that are recurrent. This takes time and sustained interaction. (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015, pp. 1–2)

CoP participants continue developing as they improve skills in obtaining the information and technology necessary in the group's social circle, and effectively utilize such information and technology (Wenger, 1998). In order to establish membership in the CoP and contribute to

the group, new members are required to master appropriate semiotic resources, or tools and rules for meaning-making (Mickan, 2013; Sugiman, 2006), as well as participate in social activities (Halliday 1978; Mickan 2013), which explains the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the case of the General English Academic Program (GEAP), which provides learners with the opportunity to participate in English lessons with the same classmates several times per week, examples of semiotic resources in the classroom are wide-ranging, including communication patterns, textbooks, and online submission systems, in addition to the participants themselves, such as the students and instructors who belong to the community (Mickan, 2013; Sugiman, 2006).

Origins of the Concept of CoPs
A discussion of the formation and development of the CoP concept to date must draw on its theoretical definitions by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002). Even though the theory and concept of CoPs has undergone changes and development, there are commonalities, including the explanation of what "learning" really is (Cox, 2005). The differences in the concept of the CoP learning perspective concern community, learning, power relations, change, and diversity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

First, the learning perspective of Lave and Wenger (1991) assumes that instructors recognize the limitations of teaching in the classroom and embraces the idea that learning is a personal activity within the framework of education theory. This concept considers learning to be embedded in the situation rather than representing a planned and mechanical process of cognition and communication. As the first to define the concept of the CoP, Lave and Wenger (1991) stated that the purpose of learning is to clarify the behaviors and ideas of people who participate in activities, such as how they handle issues in the group, accomplish tasks, and solve problems; it is not to look at how groups reproduce existing knowledge and recognize it as learning. However, Cox (2005) observed that potential conflicts related to relations between "existing members" of the community and "legitimate participants" (those with less specialized knowledge and skills who do not play a central role in the community) were not discussed in detail.

Second, members in CoPs mutually participate in appropriate activities (Wenger, 1998). The study by Wenger (1998) was the first to discuss the relationship between a CoP and the identities of the participants. Understanding the level of participation in the community and the conflicts that arise when different community members communicate would lead to a corresponding understanding of the identities of individual participants (Wenger, 1998, p. 85).

The study by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) further applied and popularized the concept of the CoP. Their definition was informed by previous studies of people with common ground gathering together to create a CoP. The common ground includes those working on a series of problems, being enthusiastic about a particular topic, and increasing the knowledge and skills in the community they belong to. In addition, CoP members experience on-going tasks together within the community and participate in the community's events.

Applying the Concept of the CoP to EFL Research
Three issues can be raised with respect to CoPs and research within the context of EFL learning, for which solutions are presented here. First, Haneda (2006, p. 811) pointed out that

Lave and Wenger (1991) did not closely examine the concept of CoPs. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), new members of an informal community emerge in everyday life to become experienced members through repeated interactions. Furthermore, they stated that the community has legitimate peripheral participants, who transition to becoming human resources rich in experience. In the example of a class group at college, members gather together only during a certain period of time, forming one large community. Afterward, students are forced to disband the CoP to which they belong. This suggests that the nature of school classrooms is different from that of informal groups emerging in everyday life, such as those studied by Lave and Wenger (1991). Going forward, it is important to examine how the CoPs of Lave and Wenger (1991) exist in this type of formal community.

Second, studies have been conducted on the activity patterns and structure of CoPs in groups across many fields, particularly in business-related groups, since the 1990s (Kanamitsu, 2009). However, it is considered difficult to visualize the overall picture, the process of creation and development, specific examples of components, and the activity patterns of CoPs, since few studies have examined these aspects (Ribeiro, 2011). For this reason, Ribeiro (2011) stressed the need for case studies on CoPs in specific contexts or from particular backgrounds. Thus, in order to understand how CoPs are embedded in the EFL context of higher education institutions, it is necesary to continuously observe how they evolve and examine the components required to consider the FL classroom as a CoP.

Aims of the Present Research

A limited number of studies have been undertaken on the process and overall picture of CoPs (Ribeiro, 2011). Thus, previous studies that have incorporated the concept of CoPs will be summarized with an analysis of trends in their application of this concept. Then, the pedagogical implications of treating EFL classrooms in Japanese higher education institutions as CoPs will be discussed. In this study, "a class of students and their instructor participating in a group (population)" is defined as a CoP. For example, a group (population) of students in a class unit, such as a group of 25 students and their instructor (named "Classroom A"), will be treated as CoP A. The possibility of treating "a group of groups of students and their instructor in the unit of classroom" as one CoP will also be examined in order to apply the concept to Japanese higher education institutions. However, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner noted the following in an email to the Author on August 20, 2015: "Classrooms are part of the design created by educational institutions and organizations and not CoPs." They also asserted that "it can be possible to view a group (population) of multiple students and their instructor as a CoP, depending on what the researcher is trying to discuss about them."

This statement by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner can be interpreted to mean that a group (population) of students and their instructor is a CoP even though a classroom is not a CoP, depending on the researcher's perspective in the study. Therefore, it is possible to treat a group (population) of multiple students and their instructor in the classroom unit as a CoP by analyzing and examining previous studies conducted on the same type of CoP.

Methods

The research approach selected for this study was largely methodological and adapted from, among other sources, the ideas of Fukuta (2015) on potential methodological biases in research on learning. The research questions are as follows: 1) To what extent is the concept

of CoPs applicable in higher education EFL classrooms in Japan? 2) Can a group of students, such as 30 EFL students and their instructor, form a CoP, and is the hypothesis that "one classroom can be treated as a CoP" valid.

First, in Phase 1, papers and books published between 1989 and 2018 that contained the term "communities of practice" were counted. Furthermore, a separate analysis was conducted by journal on papers published between 1970 and 2018. The purpose of this section is to show the big picture of the transformation in the research regarding the notion of CoPs from the early 1970s to the present. Then, in Phase 2, 15 academic journals were selected and examined to see whether the concept of the CoP was used as a core idea, a theoretical framework, or a subordinate idea. A screening process was implemented to search for studies using and extending Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of the CoP in the context of language learning classrooms, in which it serves as a core framework for creating a CoP out of one classroom. Major journals on L2 classrooms and L2 acquisition research (e.g. *The Language Learning Journal*, and *Applied Linguistics*) published between 1989 and 2016 were checked as potential sources via Google Scholar and ERIC.

The research articles were chosen on the basis of whether the CoP concept was used as a core research framework, constituted a learning classroom, involved language learners as research participants in a classroom-based context of higher education, or was part of a study methodology employing qualitative and/or quantitative research or teaching practicums. The way in which the CoP concept was applied to classroom communities and discussed in the research was further examined. The subjects of the study were college students, graduate students, ESL students, and instructors.

Results and Discussion

Results of the Analysis of Studies Relating to CoPs
Phase 1: Publications relating to CoPs. Table 1 presents the results of a Google Scholar search using the keyword "communities of practice" (as of January 23, 2019). The results showed that the number of published journal articles and books related to CoPs has been increasing since Lave and Wenger (1991) first proposed their definition. The increasing numbers in Table 1 imply that the concept of the CoP has come to be applied not only to disciplinary areas involving pedagogy and classroom-based research but also to other fields.

Table 1. Numbers of Papers and Books about Communities of Practice

Year	Number (approximately)
1991–1992	118
1993–1994	314
1995–1996	609
1997–1998	3,930
1999–2000	5,180
2001–2002	6,010
2003–2004	10,300
2005–2006	14,400

2007–2008	16,200
2009–2010	16,400
2011–2012	17,000
2013–2014	16,800
2015–2016	18,000
2017–2018	19,000

Table 2. displays the results of a Google Scholar and ERIC search using the keywords "communities of practice" and "language learning" (as of January 23, 2019) to identify different journals covering pedagogy and language learning research.

Table 2. Results by Journal

Journal Names	Number of papers (A)	Number of papers (B)	Note
Applied Linguistics	52	32	(A) means searched as "communities of practice" only, (B) means "communities of practice" and researched related with "language learning"
Language Learning Journal	4,621	5	(A): "communities of practice" in anywhere (B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "language learning" in anywhere
Language Learning Journal	_	5	(B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "classrooms" in anywhere
Teaching in Higher Education	749	13	(A): "communities of practice" in anywhere (B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "language learning" in anywhere
Teacher Development	518	11	(A): "communities of practice" in anywhere (B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "language learning" in anywhere
Education Action Research	110	16	(B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "language learning" in anywhere
Education Action Research	_	16	(B): "communities of practice" in Keywords and "classrooms" in anywhere

Phase 2: Overview of 15 selected papers. This section focused on journals that cover language learning, classroom research, and higher education to examine the trends of studies employing the concept of CoPs, considering how the concept is viewed and approached in terms of analysis method and objective. Fifteen papers on CoPs were selected; the basis for the selection was papers that specifically focused on college students, graduate students, EFL or ESL students, or instructors in the context of language learning. Table 3 shows how the concept of CoPs was dealt with in the 15 papers. It was found that CoP was most commonly treated as a theoretical framework, which means that these studies did not examine one classroom as one CoP (n = 11). Five papers defined one classroom as a CoP, while five papers deemed multiple CoPs to exist within one classroom.

Table 3. Overview of 15 Selected Studies: The Concept of the CoP and the Purpose of the Study

			Koga, Furuya, and Miyo (2015)	Kapucu (2012)	Tapp (2013)	Murray (2008)	Norton (2001)	Toohey (1998)	Morita (2004)	Yaegashi and Sato (2011)	Rogers (2000)	Keuk (2015)	Guo and Lin (2016)	Tavakoli (2015)	Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015)	Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, and Aberasturi-Apraiz (2015)	Rovai (2002)	Total
Concepts	1	Theoretical Framework	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	11
	2	Core Idea	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
	3	Subordinate Idea	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	5
	4	Group in a Classroom	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
	5	One Classroom	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
	6	Outside of Classroom	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	7	Online	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
	8	Imagined Community	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Study's focus	1	Transition of students	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	6
	2	Transition of the instructor	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	5
	3	Classroom development	1	0	0	0		0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	4	Curriculum design improvement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	5	Traits of the CoP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
	6	Changes in speaking ability	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	7	Improvement in classroom design	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	8	Longitudinal observation in a unique learning environment	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

The research objectives of the 15 selected papers are presented in Table 3. The results showed that the most common research objectives were related to the transformation and transition of students (n = 6). These studies highlighted learners' transformation from novice to higher levels in terms of their degree of participation and their reading and writing proficiencies in the target language, and focused on newly acquired abilities and knowledge. The next most common focus was the transition of the instructor in the classroom (n = 5). These studies focused on changes in how teachers solved problems in their classrooms, how they interacted with their learners, and their developing pedagogical awareness in terms of teaching methodologies. This was followed by research objectives related to class development, such as studying how a new class transitions from one stage to the next (n = 3). Classrooms were explored longitudinally in these studies to understand how they were organized and how they developed from mere places to CoPs.

There is evidence from these articles to suggest that the original concept of CoPs can encompass one class. For instance, 67 per cent of the studies (n = 10) used the concept of CoP as a research framework, 33 per cent (n = 5) as a subordinate framework, and 33 per cent (n = 5) indicated that it is possible to consider one classroom as one CoP.

Discussion of the Concept of CoPs in Higher Education EFL Classrooms in Japan
Koga, Furuya, and Miyo (2015) treated a group consisting of smaller groups of students and their instructor in the unit of the classroom at a higher education institution as a CoP. The study specifically examined a Japanese class for international students at a university and the process of organizing and launching the class unit as a CoP. In building their practice framework, it was considered important "for students to share the awareness toward their issues through discussions and to launch the class as a CoP by proactively engaging in one activity" (Koga, Furuya, & Miyo, 2015, p. 183). In other words, a CoP is characterized by students clarifying awareness of issues, trying to resolve them, and having a common goal. As "[i]t is essential for the entire class to proactively promote the activity" (Koga, Furuya, & Miyo, 2015, p. 183), the autonomy of the students participating in the classroom activity is pivotal.

Eckert, Goldman, and Wenger (1997) stated that it is important for schools to provide students with opportunities to apply the concept of CoPs to the classroom according to the subject of their study. A CoP is not something that is naturally created: it is necessary to create an environment for a CoP to grow and for the instructor to support its development.

In the next section, previous research on the CoP learning perspective will be critically examined in order to determine whether it is valid to regard a group of students and their instructor in the unit of the English classroom in a higher education institution as a CoP. Furthermore, how the CoPs observed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and those occurring in the context of studying English at higher education institutions differ will be considered.

Applying the Existing Definition of a CoP to College EFL Classrooms
Is it possible to consider an expansion of Lave and Wenger's (1991) definition of CoPs? The concept of a CoP is "a community in which individuals share the method and meaning of acts they are engaged in, form repertoires, and implement the practice while utilizing the resources that have been shared" (Tanabe, 2003, p. 134).

The framework and boundary lines established by the norms and institutions in the group (community) are relevant to understanding the characteristics of CoPs. Tanabe (2003) stated

that boundary lines are sometimes drawn around an existing community by an institution. For example, in the case of a university and its committees, classes at school, and local community associations would necessarily determine boundaries of time and place. According to Lave and Wenger's (1991) definition of the original concept of CoPs, orginally networks and communities such as groups of midwives, tailors, and nondrinking alchoholics were observed in order to identify their learning as communities' members and to discern how novices become experienced members within the CoPs. These features compose CoPs: regular exchange of information; commonality and diversity; voluntary involvement and participation; spontaneous leadership; reciprocity; open atmosphere; reliance; and informal management of groups and communities (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). On the other hand, the concept of classroom communities in school contexts such as EFL classes at universities are considered to be formal groups. This seems to create a distinction between informal and formal boundaries that conflicts with formal CoPs at a university. These differences can lead to the question of whether new CoPs can be createed and if a group of students, such as 30 EFL students and their instructor, form a CoP. Finally, is the hypothesis that one classroom can be treated as a CoP valid?

Boundary lines in informal groups – or groups in which membership is ambiguous since members come and go – such as Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) and religious groups offer up some points to consider. Tanabe (2003, p. 135) suggested that these groups also "draw boundary lines – both thick or thin – to separate the inside from the outside or to subdivide the inside, when looking at these groups from the perspective of institutions." It can be argued that if the boundaries are classified on the basis of systematic institutional organization (with hard boundaries established by the institution) as the first criterion, no communities in this world would meet the criteria of a CoP. However, Tanabe (2003, p. 135) argued that the concept of CoPs "attempts to capture the manner in which people's practices are socially organized, developed, and changed through mutual engagement and collaboration by enclosing the institutionally established hard boundaries in parentheses for the time being." Tanabe did not deem the institutional boundary lines to necessarily match the CoP boundaries proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) (Tanabe, 2003, p. 135). In addition, Tanabe (2003) illustrated this boundary issue by discussing high school classes, in which students engage in learning and organized play by creating small CoPs with fellow students across and beyond the class, even though classes at high school seem to operate under a single institutional framework. These features are, in fact, very similar to the definition of CoPs advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991). Therefore, recognizing a unit of the high school classroom as a CoP seems generally valid.

Rogoff (1994) considered a classroom as both a learning community and place of learning, and there are many commonalities between the characteristics of the classroom presented by Rogoff (1994) and those of a CoP. For example, she described a classroom community in which participating members have shared goals and resolve common issues. These characteristics are likewise proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) regarding CoPs. On this basis, it can be presumed that there are common characteristics between the classroom and the CoP.

The second characteristic concerning the problem of recognizing groups of students and their instructor in the unit of the classroom at higher education institutions as a CoP concerns the fact that the class ceases to exist as soon as the lesson is over. For example, students in a typical English classroom at a Japanese university work and study with the same members for a certain period of time (six months or one year), after which they must disband. It is thus

necessary to consider the characteristics of such classrooms in relation to the developmental characteristics of CoPs defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), who identified five stages in the development of a CoP, whereby the group gradually ceases to exist once it enters the fifth stage. One of the issues pertaining to the theory is that of English classes at higher education institutions being treated as CoPs when they cease to exist as soon as the lesson is over, even in the middle of the developmental stage. On the other hand, even if the class ceases to exist, this does not imply that aspects such as having gained an understanding of the content, interaction with other members, and student identities based on having participated in the class will also cease to exist. The experience and knowledge gained there are highly likely to be used when participating in the next CoP, even if the CoP they currently belong to ceases to exist.

The Learning Perspective and Educational Implications of the CoP
It is appropriate to look at the similarities between EFL classrooms at higher education institutions and CoPs when considering their educational implications. Higher education institutions are communities in which people with diverse interests and ideas come together, have a common understanding of the meaning, goal, and role of activities in that group, and participate in the practice together as a CoP. By participating in CoPs, participants acquire knowledge and skills, and transform their identities through interaction with other members (Sugihara, 2006). The following two reasons for considering college classes as CoPs were suggested: "(1) the formation of knowledge is viewed as something that emerges out of the situation and relations of members' collaborative activities rather than merely out of the process of transfer and acceptance of knowledge," and "(2) the formation of knowledge is viewed as the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as something of general personal characteristic such as the formation of identity" (Sugihara, 2006, p. 167). On these grounds, Sugihara proposed that college classes are useful in analyzing the essence of CoPs (Sugihara, 2006). According to Sugihara, the meaning lies in expanding the concept of CoPs, allowing students "to cooperate with existing CoPs and simulatively participate," thereby creating a community where knowledge can be generated through students' participation in the pseudo-CoP. In other words, it seems that one of the challenges is for instructors to provide "a CoP described in terms of creating new knowledge by having multiple, different CoPs … cooperate" in college lectures (Sugihara, 2006, p. 167).

In reconsidering the CoP proposed by Wenger (1998), it is noted that the first of the three characteristics of his CoP model is the mutual participation of its members. In English classes at higher education institutions, it is necessary for instructors to provide settings with extensive opportunities to learn collaboratively through pair and group work. The next characteristic of a CoP is that the participants negotiate participation in the activity. This assumes that there is interaction among students. In terms of classroom conversation, the teacher should avoid controlling the interaction and refrain from intervening in order to develop spontaneous discussions. The third characteristic of a CoP is that the skills of individual students or groups related to their areas of expertise are shared with other members or the entire class. It is thus necessary to longitudinally observe how shared skills and knowledge are spread among students.

The relevance of the three characteristics of the CoP in Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) to EFL/ESL classrooms in higher educationrequires examination. First, the participants are said to be responsible for their participation in the domain of the organization to which they belong (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In the context of the EFL classroom in institutions of higher education, the community to which the students belong is

the English class. The first-year students in this study mainly belong to the English class of the liberal arts faculty; it is not the case that they belong to a community centered on studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The English curriculum for the first-year students who participated in this study incorporates ESP in its second year, and specifically English for management and business. Concerning the feature of the CoP's domain in the classroom setting, the curriculum and lesson syllabus can be designed in a way that incorporates the characteristic of participating in the activity to learn English via an individual, a pair, or a group.

Next, the commonality between the second characteristic of CoPs, the community, and the characteristics of the community learning English at a higher education institution will be considered. For a classroom to be regarded as a CoP, the teacher must provide an environment in which students can learn by helping other members, sharing information, and maintaining mutually receptive relationships with other members. In other words, the concept of the CoP includes the element of collaborative learning. Sakamoto (2008) deemed planning and the division of roles to be a precondition of collaboration. In order to make collaborative learning work, there must be a setting where diverse members with different skills gather in a specific community and meet with other members (Sakamoto, 2008). However, since high school graduates from Japan and other countries come together as participants in college classes – especially first-year classes – within an environment for studying English, their experience of methods, purpose, and motivation for studying English, as well as their personal backgrounds, differ. It is therefore possible for collaborative learning to take place among diverse members with different skills even within the environment of a school classroom. As the second characteristic of collaborative learning, Sakamoto (2008) listed relationships built on mutual trust among those in the community, whereby each student maintains a partnership with other members while simultaneously retaining their own independence.

The third characteristic related to collaborative learning is that of "sharing the learning objective, tasks, values, and results" (Sakamoto, 2008, p. 53). The sharing of clear goals, which is one of the characteristics of collaborative learning, is similar to cooperative learning. In order to maximize their own learning as well as that of each other, students are sometimes divided into groups to undertake activities through collaborative learning, in which students are expected to actively participate in the learning process, rather than passively absorb the information provided (Kapucu, 2012). In other words, as in the learning perspective of Lave and Wenger (1991), collaborative learning can be interpreted as the idea of students learning through participation and interaction. Students are assumed to be capable of actively participating in the community by taking the skills and knowledge they have acquired and applying them at the time of working with others and participating in the community to which they belong (Kapucu, Arslan, Yuldashev, & Demiroz, 2010). It is important to establish a group by connecting individuals or creating a CoP for the purpose of learning, as this leads to participants understanding the learning patterns that work in that community, and hence becoming competent in the use of relevant skills. Learning occurs through interaction between people when activities are conjointly implemented (Kapucu, 2012). It is thus important that lessons incorporate the characteristics of collaborative learning when applying the concept of the CoP to EFL education, given that collaborative learning is central to its definition.

Conclusion

This paper has considered CoPs in the context of EFL classrooms involving collaborative learning within a community, which has come to represent the goal of university education reform in Japan. In particular, the paper examined the validity and significance of treating the EFL classroom as a CoP, as several elements that are inherent to the EFL classroom – broad student participation, collaborative group work, and practice within groups in authentic and meaningful contexts point to the natural development of a CoP as an appropriate EFL construct. The study by Lave and Wenger (1991) on the learning perspective of CoPs includes a variety of fields such as business, research related to local community development, and IT. However, as Lave (1991) stated, it is difficult to clarify the trends and functions of CoP activities. Therefore, few studies have focused on the concept of the CoP itself as one of the issues. The number of studies that have treated a group of students and their instructor in the unit of the classroom as a CoP is even more limited. To examine whether it is valid to do so, the present study conducted an analysis of previous research papers. One of the issues that emerged is that Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of the CoP – particularly, CoPs related to groups that have been formed both formally and informally – has not been rigorously examined. The fact that formal groups such as FL classes are disbanded after a certain period of time presents a problem. Therefore, further studies on classrooms as CoPs are necessary, and the definition of CoPs for classrooms must be developed by considering essential features of an effective EFL classroom. Redefining an EFL classroom as a CoP would necessarily require instructors to comprehend the most important aspects of effective EFL instruction – a sense of community, multiple, frequent opportunities for practive in realistic group settings, and occasions for small and large group exploration of significant language-related topics. In such a setting, the atmosphere of the EFL classroom would be more condusive for enhanced language acquisition for all students.

The study does suffer from a number of limitations. In Phase 2, the selection of 15 journal articles was completed on the basis of their apparent suitability and relevance to the topic under discussion. The degree to which these articles are representative of the entire body of research could be questioned. A future study could expand the range of articles and studies and provide additional reassurance on the reliability and general applicability of the material and its analysis. In addition, the study only examined EFL and ESL students and classes and with a mainly theoretical approach. Future research could broaden the field to include other types of students and classes and apply an empirical as well as theoretical point of view.

Acknowledgements

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