# Situated learning in the workplace:
## Towards more effective English education for business communication[1]

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) would seem to fit naturally with the concept of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), since both aim to promote successful social practice in situated contexts. Yet the field of ESP has so far given little attention to the social theory of situated learning.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how learners learn English in the workplace and to offer suggestions for effective ESP education at Japanese hotels in the light of situated learning theory. This research is grounded in my own experience[2] of ESP education at a major Japanese hotel, which gives me practical and needs-focused perspectives. After a short description of the theoretical framework of this study in section 2, section 3 takes up a Japanese English learner working at a hotel as a case study, taking a closer look at situated learning through learner's interviews. Section 4 suggests a more effective form of ESP education at Japanese hotels based on the theory of situated learning. Lastly, Section 5 summarizes the whole paper and claims that the idea is potentially applicable to all fields of ESP.

## 2. ESP and situated learning
## 2.1 Discourse communities and communities of practice

ESP has a special focus on the needs and social groups to which learners belong (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). ESP courses should be designed to meet the specific needs of learners and learners' present or future "discourse communities" (Swales, 1990), so that they promote educational effectiveness and also learners' motivation. Needs analysis is important in ESP studies, and many ESP researchers have discussed issues such as the methodologies of needs analysis, kinds of needs, and application of needs analysis in specific fields (e.g., Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Porcher, 1983; L. West, 1984; R. West, 1994). For example, Hutchinson & Waters (1987) stress the importance of what they call learning needs, which focus on how learners want to learn English. They state that target situation analysis, which Munby (1978) proposed, is not enough and that it only serves as a destination of English learning. They describe learning needs as a route of the journey from the lacks (present situation) to the necessities, or the target.

The relationship between the notion of a discourse community in ESP and that of communities of practice in the social theory of learning is discussed in Flowerdew (2000), Johns (1997), and Mavor & Trayner (2001). Discourse communities and communities of

practice are deeply interrelated because both of them are social groups of people with common goals.

Swales (1990) sets the definition of a discourse community with six characteristics: agreed set of common public goals, mechanisms of intercommunication among its members, participatory mechanisms, one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims, specific lexis, and a threshold level of members (pp. 24-27). He stresses that the communicative needs of the goal decide the characteristics of a discourse community, and that the notion of a discourse community has its focus on the relationships between the goal and communication, language.

On the other hand, communities of practice from the social theory of learning have more focus on what people do as practice in their communities, where communication is an indispensable part of the practice. Communities of practice, created by the pursuit of a shared enterprise, can be found everywhere and all people belong to several communities of practice at any moment (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) describes the concept of practice as follows:

> The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice. (Wenger, 1998, p. 47)

Wenger explains that practices include explicit ones like the language, tools, and well-defined roles, and implicit ones such as tacit conventions, subtle cues, and rules of thumb.

Examples of hotel staff communities can help us to see how communities of practice are recognized. A restaurant community of practice is created by the pursuit of shared goals, some of which are to make guests satisfied with their food and beverages and to make a profit. It also has explicit practices such as serving food and beverages, cooking, washing dishes, and cleaning the facilities, and implicit practices such as unwritten conventions among the staff and shared values on their job. Thus their goals and practices make the community distinct from other communities such as a bar community or a front-desk community.

There are levels of communities according to how specifically people contribute there (Johns, 1997). That is to say, there are more general communities and genres shared with other communities. In examples of hotel's communities, we can recognize certain community levels; specific communities such as a restaurant community, a bar community, a front-desk community, and a housekeeping community, and also, the food and beverage community which includes the restaurant and the bar communities, and the rooms division community which includes the front-desk and the housekeeping communities, and finally a whole hotel community including all the specific communities. The more general communities have also more general shared values and concepts each specific community has.

Lave & Wenger (1991) mention that people learn through legitimate peripheral participation in their communities of practice, and this process of learning they describe as

situated learning. They claim that legitimate peripheral participation can be recognized clearly in apprenticeship. Lave & Wenger explain the concept of legitimate peripheral participation: Legitimacy of participation means the defining characteristic of ways of belonging, and it is "not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constitutive element of its content", and pheripherality acts as a positive term, meaning relationships and relevance with what is going on in the community (pp. 35-37). They claim that newcomers learn through the process of becoming a full participant of the community.

Lave & Wenger's example of Vai and Gola tailors illustrates how Legitimate Peripheral Participation works in apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 69-72). In their communities of practice, while they can observe their masters, journeymen, and other apprentices, newcomers can also take part in the practices. At the first step newcomers start to do the peripheral work such as attaching buttons and hemming cuffs, which is the latter stage of the whole procedure of tailoring garments. The newcomers can learn the construction of garments by doing these jobs, reducing the risks of failures. If they are considered as a more skilled member, they go to the next stage, sewing, a more responsible job. The order of learning is not the same as the production procedure; in fact it is completely reversed. Sewing gives the idea of how clothes should be cut in the previous stage, which is also the next step of their learning. Thus, each stage of work helps workers to understand how the previous stage contributes to what they are doing in their stage. In this way, apprentice tailors learn to become full participants as they engage in progressively more responsible practices of the community.

Lave & Wenger (1991) question the concept of transfer of learning on which school education, including ESP, is based. Transfer of learning is affected by the similarity of previous and subsequent study, and the amount of transfer reflects the extent of the similarity (Osgood, 1949). Context plays an important role in learning (Carraher, Carraher, & Schliemann, 1985). Therefore, ESP can be seen as utilizing learners' disciplines as context to promote transfer of learning in the learners' social practice. Lave & Wenger (1991), however, point out that knowing a general rule does not mean that people can act appropriately in specific circumstances. Situated learning is a way for people to learn to become full participants in their socio-cultural communities of practice, making abstract representations very specific to the situation.

Although they have their own perspectives and focus on practice and communication, and different ideas regarding transfer of learning, the concept of discourse communities and that of communities of practice can denote the same existing communities. It may, therefore, be reasonable to say that situated learning as a learning process in social practice can give ESP some suggestions because ESP is also aiming for learners' successful social practice.

## 2.2 Applying situated learning to ESP

As we have seen above, ESP and situated learning are similar in that both of them focus on the social practice of learners, and that they pay much attention to the specific field that

the learners belong to and specific skills that the learners have to acquire.

Flowerdew (2000) mentions that legitimate peripheral participation in the discourse community plays an important role in his case study of a scholar learning to write a research paper in his specific field. In order to stay as a member scholar in the discourse community he belonged to, the scholar participated in academic meetings, exchanged information, and worked on a joint research project with other members. Mavor & Trayner (2001) propose a course designed with tasks which help learners to establish their professional identity as a future participant in the community of practice. They insist that it is important for ESP teachers to be conscious of learners' future communities of practice because their learners are expecting to become members of them.

However, these researches concern ESP in academic settings, and there are few researches applying the social theory of learning to ESP in occupational settings. Therefore, we shall take a look at a Japanese hotel and try to analyze through interviews how hotel staff learn in their workplace. Based on the findings, we discuss in section 4 how the social theory of learning can be applied to ESP in business organizations.

## 3. English learning in the workplace
### 3.1 Objectives

This section tries to investigate how learners learn English in the workplace. This study focuses on an employee in a Japanese hotel, with whom interviews are conducted. The interviews concentrate particularly on autonomous English learning, motivation towards English learning, and English learning through his work.

### 3.2 Participant

The participant was a doorman who had been working for the hotel for three years. He met about 20 English-speaking guests every day, and he thought he needed English ability for his job. He had no problem in communicating simple things in English, since he had studied English not only in senior high school but also through radio programs. The hotel he was working for was aware of the importance of the quality of their service and they provided English education programs for better guest service. The participant was taking the English training once a week. The teacher of the class tried to make his English classes enjoyable by using language games based on the communicative approach. The participant liked working at the hotel and learning English for his job.

### 3.3 Interviews and interpretations

Q.1   What do you think of the English lessons?
"We have fun playing language games in the English lessons. The English lessons are useful because I can ask questions about the difficulties I experience in my job."

Q. 2   Do you study English by yourself?

"Yes. When I have to write messages for guests, I often look up words or phrases in the dictionary. That is how I learn the English phrases I need for my job."

Being a very motivated English learner, the participant seems to enjoy learning English in classes and try to make the most of the English education by asking questions. Moreover, when the participant came to recognize important phrases in writing messages for guests, the needs of English in his job led him further towards autonomous learning.

Q.3   How do you study English and improve your skills?
"Since I started meeting with guests in my job, I've learned to comprehend what they are saying, because I began to know that they stressed important words. I don't know how I acquired such listening skills but I'm sure this wasn't taught by anyone in the English lessons."

Q.4   Do you think you are learning English from your colleagues?
"My colleagues with more experience have sometimes taught me English phrases. For example, a colleague told me to add 'sir' or 'ma'am' at the end of the sentences. But more often I 'steal' better phrases from my colleagues. I often hear what my colleagues with more experience are saying in English and I try to speak English like them."

These comments suggest the importance of the workplace for learning English. One of the main reasons why the participant improved his English skills seemed to be his professional practice in the workplace. At first he did not have enough English ability, i.e. he was a more peripheral participant of the community, but, he learned to understand and communicate with foreign guests somehow in English, sometimes as a result of the help of more skilled colleagues, or with the help of other information like dictionaries. This means that he became a more skilled English-speaking member of the community by practicing his job. This is what Lave & Wenger (1991) describe as situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation, and this interview seemed to verify that situated learning plays an important role for learning English.

**3.4 Discussion**

From the perspective of the social theory of learning, the interviews with a learner revealed that situated learning is very important for learning English. Situated learning gave the learner chances to know what kinds of English skills are needed in his work, such as listening skills and appropriate phrases for messages, and motivated him to learn English for his work. Therefore, he gradually managed to communicate with guests.

It is worth noting that the participant often learned English from his colleagues. Lave & Wenger (1991) claim that "it seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in

relation with other apprentices" (p. 93). This suggests that practicing with other people of the same community can play an important role in learning English. Based on these analyses, the workplace can be utilized for more effective ESP teaching. The next section will consider this perspective in suggestions for ESP education at hotels.

## 4 Suggestions for ESP education at hotels

This section suggests a more appropriate form of ESP education at hotels, from the perspective of situated learning. As the development of educational systems, the function of training of the employees goes to the realm of the special training section of hotels. Wenger (1998) questions that any training scheme should be purely extractive in nature, and claims that "this kind of extractive training ignores an organization's most valuable learning resource: practice itself"(p. 249). We have seen in sections 2 and 3 that people learn through participating in the practice of their communities. This section suggests learning on the job, making use of the concept of communities, practice, and participation.

### 4.1 Difficulties in educational systems of hotels

There are many difficulties for hotels in practicing ESP education. As they are in 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year operation and staff work in shifts, it is hardly possible for all hotel staff to get together for ESP classes. The result of this situation should be that hotels have to set up many opportunities for staff to learn English, if they are to meet staff needs. For example, if a lesson with the same content is given several times a week, they can choose which lesson they attend according to their working schedule and it is easier for them to continue learning along with the ESP course.

However, this means hard work on the part of the English education section of hotels. As ESP varies department by department at a hotel, the English education section has to design separate ESP courses for each department, such as ESP for the front desk, housekeeping, bell service, restaurants, and bars. When each ESP course gives the same lessons several times a week, the English education section has to take care of numerous lessons. Moreover, many lessons mean many teachers. Not only do they have to find many teachers for the ESP courses; they also have to consider the cost, the payroll for the teachers. Cost-effective ESP courses which are based on learners' needs can cost a lot in many ways, especially in such difficult conditions as those of hotels.

### 4.2 Teaching on site

To solve such problems and for the effective and practical way of ESP education at hotels, situated learning can be applied in the course design.

It is difficult for hotel staff to get together for lessons as we discussed above, the workplace is the most suitable site for teaching and learning. If ESP education is practiced in the workplace, it can provide many lessons by utilizing times when business is slow or everyday staff meeting times when all staff can easily attend the lessons.

According to the concept of communities of practice in the social theory of learning, ESP education in the workplace can cause situated learning in the community of practice. There are staff with various levels of English ability, and they are learning English in aiming for acquiring better English ability by participating in their work and also by learning in the ESP course of their own communities of practice. Learners will learn English with their colleagues and build identities as more experienced English-speaking hotel staff.

### 4.3 Materials

The workplace is rich in authentic materials. This is another reason why the workplace should be made use of as a training site. For example, in the ESP course for restaurants, there are real menus, checks which guests actually paid, food and beverages they serve, and facilities and equipment that can be used for materials. For example, restaurant menus can be used for role-plays where learners can practice explaining each item.

Post experiences in pursuing their job can provide good opportunities for staff to acquire problem-solving ability. For example, co-workers' experience of English communication failure gives learners a chance to discuss ways of better communication. For the consistent policy in the problem solving as hotel staff, hospitality is the most important. To provide high quality service based on hospitality is one of the main purposes of hotels, namely, the hotel staff community of practice. Therefore, ESP teachers should be aware of the concept of hospitality in teaching English, and this is one of the main features of the genre in which hotel staff communicate with guests.

### 4.4 Teachers

The workplace also has a suitable ESP teacher, the manager, who has subject knowledge and English ability as a skilled member of the hotel staff. The manager functions as a skilled English speaker in the community of practice to promote situated learning for subordinate staff. As the manager is experienced in serving English-speaking guests, his or her staff can get valuable information on service skills as well as linguistic knowledge of English. In the case of more difficult problems about English, an English teacher can help in teaching collaboration with the manager. However, the main teacher should be the manager in the light of the social theory of learning, and the English teacher just gives advice when needed.

### 4.5 Evaluation

As the main purpose of the ESP education at hotels is to provide high quality service with hospitality by speaking appropriate English, the evaluation of learners should focus on that point. Evaluation which only tests linguistic knowledge or makes use of general English qualification tests, is not appropriate for the ESP education for hotel staff and can even make learners set their goal as getting a good mark in the test itself. Therefore, the evaluation of learners should be judged by the ability in performance as hotel staff who can speak

appropriate English for their service. The person who can conduct such evaluation best is the manager, who is a skilled staff member in their community of practice. Moreover, this system of manager's evaluation can promote learners' motivation, because it is usually the manager who evaluates the job performance of the staff.

### 4.6 Classroom teaching

Classroom teaching can be compatible with situated learning in the workplace, as it is to supplement "the learning potential inherent in practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 250). The knowledge and skills that classroom teaching can give are also helpful for learners, but the classroom teaching always needs to make learners aware of the practice of their communities (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, teachers need to show linkage between what they teach and the practices of learners' communities.

Classroom teaching can provide an intensive course for certain skills such as listening skills. As we have seen in the struggle with listening comprehension experienced by an employee in section 3, listening ability is indispensable for job performance at hotels. Intensive listening courses can expose learners to English in order to train listening skills. There are many listening materials on the market and on web sites, and an ESP teacher can apply them for hotel staff. For new employees, just before starting their jobs, when there is no restriction of working schedule and they can get together to study English, classroom teaching can help them to learn basic English expressions for hotel staff as general specific English for the hotel they will work for.

### 4.7 Human resource system

The human resource system should be taken into consideration for raising awareness in ESP education within a company. Job performance is the main subject of evaluation in the human resource system, but skills of appropriate English communication with guests should also be valued. As for qualifications for managers, English ability should naturally be necessary, and they also have the important job of training their subordinates in terms of job skills, including English, as discussed above. As Yoshida (2002) emphasizes, promotion and wages should be strongly linked with job performance and related skills. In consequence, such human resource systems awaken learners to their needs and raise motivation towards learning English. Thus, it is the human resource system that strongly supports the success of ESP education.

### 5 Conclusion

Based on the discussion of the relationships between ESP and the social theory of learning in section 2, we have seen how a hotel employee was motivated to learn English in his workplace and managed to communicate with English-speaking guests. The workplace gave him valuable chances to learn the English needed for his job.

This paper has also considered more effective ways of ESP education at hotels by

applying the social theory of learning which focuses on learning through professional practices. The ESP education suggested in this paper is highly compatible with the difficult conditions for classroom education at hotels, as described in 4.1. Situated learning exists in on-the-job training and in the social practice itself, but with the development of educational systems, training programs, including ESP education, began to move to specialist training sections of companies, cutting learning apart from the context of professional practice. However, it is time to get educational system back to the community and realize the importance of social practice and its authentic context that provide learners with learning resources. This idea is also applicable to English for academic purposes, since it necessarily entails social practice and the learners belong to academic communities of practice, however peripheral they may be. Therefore, ESP practitioners, including both EOP and EAP, should make use of the perspectives of situated learning in social practices for their educational programs.

Situated learning provides analytic perspectives of how people learn to become members of communities, and by its application ESP education is re-interpreted: It is in fact a "learning-centered approach", as originally introduced by Hutchinson & Waters (1987).

**Notes**

1. This paper is a modified version of a paper presented at the Japan Association for Current English Studies 45th Annual Convention held at Daito Bunka University on October 5, 2003.

2. I used to be the manager of ESP education at one of the major hotels in Japan and I taught six kinds of English classes; English for front desk, restaurants & bars, housekeeping, bell service, tea lounge, and general hotel English for new employees. I also produced five video materials based on needs analysis for each class.

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