

Improvement of Japanese language Skills of Non-Native Speakers of Japanese through Benkyōkai as a Community of Practice*

Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson, University of New South Wales
c.thomson@unsw.edu.au

Sally Chan, University of New South Wales
Sallychan89@ymail.com

Abstract

This study observes three non-native Japanese speaking research students in Japanese studies, and their participation process in the Benkyōkai Community of Practice (CoP). Benkyōkai is a study group for these and other research students in Japanese studies at an Australian university for their mutual support during their endeavour to complete their research degrees. The study examines their development as researchers and Japanese language users in the framework of CoP (Wenger 1998) and Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), using testimonials written by themselves and their peers. The study found that the new learners progressively participate in the community in four stages of (1) limited peripheral participation; (2) scaffolded participation; (3) repeated participation; and (4) expansion of participation, as proposed by Ohta (1999). It also found that learning of Japanese does not happen in isolation, but in the process of participation in practices as the whole person, often triggered by individual turning points, which change their relationships with other members of the community.

Keywords

Benkyōkai study group, Community of Practice, situated learning, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Japanese language learning

1. Introduction

Many Australian university postgraduate students feel a sense of confusion and isolation as they begin their research. They enter into an unfamiliar structure in which they need to create their own program of study. They can use their time at liberty, but at the same time they are responsible for their own progress. This structure-less structure poses a challenge to many who may be at a loss and

* This paper was presented to the 18th Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia at the Australian National University from 8th to 11th July 2013 and has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

search for more structure and support. In order to address this issue, the Japanese Studies research team at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, has created a study group for postgraduate research students, called “Benkyōkai”.

“Benkyōkai” is the word for “study group” in Japanese. This Benkyōkai aims to support Japanese studies research students, who come from various backgrounds. While its members found Benkyōkai to be useful in conducting their research, they have also noticed unexpected, but noteworthy improvements in the Japanese proficiency of the non-native speaker members over time as they participated in weekly Benkyōkai meetings. We need to note that once students of Japanese enter a research degree, they no longer have opportunities to take part in formal Japanese language instruction. They are on their own in terms of Japanese language maintenance or further development of Japanese. It appears that Benkyōkai provided an unofficial venue for the non-native speaker members to learn Japanese.

Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate how non-native speakers of Japanese improve their Japanese language skills through their weekly participation in Benkyōkai at UNSW. We will discuss their learning as we consider Benkyōkai as a Community of Practice (CoP). In this study, we try to understand how a CoP operationalises the learning of a foreign language, Japanese.

2. Benkyōkai

As stated before, Benkyōkai aims to support its members, who are research students in Japanese studies, mostly in the discipline of applied and educational Japanese linguistics, by sharing research experiences and resources in order for them to have successful research outcomes. Benkyōkai is made up with members of various backgrounds. Members include supervisors and a diverse group of research students, including native and non-native speakers of Japanese, and they are in different types of research degrees, at various stages of their studies. Some are on-campus students and others are off-campus students.

Table 1 shows the membership of Benkyōkai at the time of this study. As the majority of the members were native speakers of Japanese, and also because the group was for Japanese studies research students, the medium of communication in Benkyōkai has been, from the beginning, Japanese. Weekly Benkyōkai meetings developed a routine of briefly reporting individual weekly research progresses, having a main discussion on a topic, which was previously agreed upon, and stating individual study plans for the coming week. The weekly discussion topics vary, such as an academic paper of common interest, a draft paper written by one of the members, an ethics application written by a member, and other topics of relevance. Occasionally members practice oral presentations before going off to a conference, and fellow members critique their presentations. In other words, Benkyōkai provides a place where the members can express research ideas, comment on one another’s ideas, share research experiences, hand down useful information to new members, and at the same time, a place where the members can anchor and monitor their research development by reporting their progresses and expressing their plans.

Japanese-Native Speakers	Non-Native Speakers (native language)
Supervisor (1)	
PhD students (3)	PhD students (2) (English; Chinese)
MA students (3)	MA student (1) (Chinese)
Practicum student (1)	
	Honours student (1) (English/Chinese)
Total (8)	Total (4)

Table 1. Members of Benkyōkai

In addition to the weekly meetings, Benkyōkai maintains a wikispace, as shown in Figure 1. The wikispace has pages for Benkyōkai administration, such as schedules, discussion topics, and weekly meeting reports; for research information, such as relevant references and conference information; and for individual members to record their progress.

Benkyōkai also uses email and Skype as forms of communication. Meeting location notifications, schedule changes, news items and such are communicated daily via email, and off campus members at times participate in weekly meetings via Skype. Further, Benkyōkai hosts social events on such occasions when a new member joins Benkyōkai, when a member receives an honour, and when a celebration is due at the end of a the year. This means that Benkyōkai is not just an academic gathering, but it goes beyond research endeavours and encompasses social bonding of the members, as well as enhancing the quality of life of postgraduate research students.



Figure 1. Benkyōkai wikispace

3. Community of Practice

Wenger (2006) describes Community of Practice (CoP) as *'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'*. It is often described as having three elements of a domain, a practice and a community, which differentiate a CoP from a simple collective group of people. A domain is defined by a common ground or a common aim shared by the group, which distinguishes the group members from others. A community refers to the function of a CoP in which the group members engage in shared activities and build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Lastly, a practice refers to the activities sustained on a regular basis in the group. The group members participate in common practices and accumulate shared experiences. Through their participation in a CoP, participants develop their identities and gain knowledge that has been shared.

Benkyōkai can be described as a CoP with its own domain, community, and practice. The domain of Benkyōkai constitutes of the common goal shared by the members, that is, to support research students in Japanese studies at UNSW for successful completion of their research, with an associated goal of enhancing the quality of their postgraduate life. The members are committed to the goals, as they directly relate to their pursuit of research degrees. Benkyōkai's practice, as described above, happens at the weekly meetings and over emails, as well as at social occasions. The members regularly discuss their own research, share problems in regards to data collection, conference presentations, and writing up chapters. They develop shared repertoires of how to apply for ethics clearance, presentation strategies, and good resources for a relevant area of research. They also routinely send emails of reporting, confirmation, appreciation, apology and other functions. Benkyōkai as the community offers a venue where the members gather and engage in the above-mentioned practices. By participating in these practices, and through the routines they go through, the members develop their own repertoires, and build relationships, which further enhances the shared practices. In the context of this paper, it is important to note that the non-native Japanese speaker members participate in these practices using Japanese.

As Lave and Wenger (1991) stated, learning is regarded as participation in a CoP, and that learning is "situated" in the context of a CoP. At a Benkyōkai meeting, the routine reporting of individual progress, for example, provides the members with a situated learning opportunity. Lave and Wenger consider the process through which a newcomer becomes a full member in a CoP as the central process of situated learning. The process entails that the learner participates in the practices of the community and develops an identity, which offers a sense of belonging and commitment to the community. The CoP provides a context for the learner to be engaged in the process. A newcomer to Benkyōkai would begin the reporting of individual progress without fully understanding its function and by mimicking the way old-timers report. In the beginning a non-native Japanese speaker newcomer may have considerable anxiety reporting in Japanese in front of native speaker old-timers. By repeated participation in the reporting practice, the newcomer would develop his/her own understanding of the reporting function, and gradually become more comfortable in doing so. According to Wenger (1998), participation is not just being there for an event, but more active engagement in certain activities with certain people, in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities.

Benkyōkai offers a venue for the members to realise their identity as a researcher who discusses their research agenda, critiques papers, and tries out new ideas, and who engages in these activities in Japanese. Identity construction in this framework is, understanding who we are in the context of certain communities. Identity construction in Benkyōkai entails being a researcher, and for the non-native Japanese speaker members, being a Japanese-speaking researcher.

4. Nylee, Nicole and Sylvia

We now take a close look at the three non-native Japanese speaker members of Benkyōkai, namely Nylee, Nicole and Sylvia¹, as seen in Table 2.

Profile (age)	Nylee (23)	Nicole (27)	Sylvia (24)
Research degree	Honours	MA	PhD
Language background	Chinese/English	Chinese	Chinese
Japanese Study history	High school to university (10 years)	University degree (4 years)	High school to postgrad (12 years)
Number of no-study years until entry to Benkyōkai	2 years	1.5 years	0 years
Time of entrance to Benkyōkai in relation to its establishment	1 years after establishment	0.5 year after establishment	Since the establishment

Table 2. Profiles of the three non-native Japanese speaker members of Benkyōkai.

All three members were different in age, and were in different types of research degrees. Nylee and Nicole had some time off from formal study of Japanese before joining Benkyōkai. Sylvia was a member of Benkyōkai when it was formally established in 2011, and Nicole, then Nylee joined Benkyōkai after a half year and 1 year, respectively. They shared their Chinese heritage but their Chinese language levels varied.

We now examine the data gathered for this study to see if and what changes are observed in Nylee, Nicole and Sylvia. The first set of data is a collection of written testimonials by Nylee, Nicole and Sylvia, and by Rinka, Shinji, and Jiro, the native Japanese speaker members of Benkyōkai. All testimonials are short compositions of around one page. The non-native Japanese speaker members wrote their self-evaluations on how and how much they thought their Japanese improved as they participated in Benkyōkai. The native-speaker members wrote on noticeable changes and improvements of the non-native speaker peers over time as they participated in Benkyōkai.

The second set of data comes from a collection of email exchanges in regards to Benkyōkai. The members exchange great many emails over time. Some are routine emails informing the venue of a

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

coming meeting, confirming who writes the reports of the meeting and such. Others include emails thanking other members for particular support, congratulating a member for an accomplishment, and consoling a member who has been ill. These emails require a variety of language types, which attend to both administrative matters and social aspects of the Benkyōkai community.

We also need to note that we, the authors of this paper, are both members of Benkyōkai. We bring our lived experiences in Benkyōkai into this writing.

4.1. Sylvia

Sylvia was one of the founding members of Benkyōkai. She was at the start, an Honours student, then became a PhD student. All three native Japanese speaker informants, Rinka, Shinji, and Jiro, wrote that Sylvia's Japanese was good from the very beginning. She was also active in participating in discussions from the beginning. Rinka and Shinji wrote that Sylvia was able to actively participate probably due to her high Japanese language proficiency and also because she knew all other members ahead of time and felt comfortable in their presence.

On the other hand, Sylvia was feeling the effect of not having formal language classes to attend and seeking opportunities to further improve her Japanese. Sylvia wrote:

Benkyōkai offers a stimulation. It offers the opportunity to practice my Japanese language skills, including speaking, processing, listening skills in the weekly interactions and writing skills in preparation for the meetings and in the weekly reports on Wikispace.²

She cherished regular interactions in Japanese with native speakers and constant exposure to a wide variety of language use in Japanese by the members of different gender, age, status and birthplace. She also benefited from observing interactions by other non-native speaker peers. She was able to understand how the native speakers interact with the non-native speakers from a third person perspective, and self-reflect on her own interactions. She was also able to learn from her peers' errors, by noting them so that she would not make the same errors.

Sylvia felt the need to improve her Japanese in general, and she specifically sensed the effect of participating in Benkyōkai in the area of academic Japanese. The weekly meetings often addressed reviews of papers written by peers in Japanese, and critical reading of academic papers written in Japanese. Although she was a competent speaker of Japanese, academic Japanese was new to her. She was also a novice researcher in the beginning. In this context, as Shinji noted, Sylvia found her role as a learner of Japanese language, which enabled her to contribute to the weekly discussions. This was her first turning point. The native speaker members of the group were researching how learners of Japanese learn Japanese from different angles, and Sylvia was able to provide much needed learner perspective to discussions. While making her contribution to the group as the Japanese language learner, Sylvia learned the ropes of how to effectively participate in discussions,

² English errors have been adjusted in testimonial quotes. Jiro's testimonial was originally written in Japanese and translated into English by the authors.

accumulated her knowledge of technical vocabulary, and how to read and write academic papers in Japanese.

As she increasingly established herself in Benkyōkai, her written emails made marked improvement. Rinka remembered the beginning:

Most of the time, she [Sylvia]³ just replied to Shinji san, Sensei and other members, saying “Hai, wakarimashita” and “Yoroshiku onegaishimasu”.

Noting that Sylvia now writes long and accurate emails, Rinka stated:

I guess the reason why her writing has improved is that she can see many examples in the Benkyōkai, such as mails from Mamiko san and Shinji san, and has more opportunities to practice writing emails as a sub-leader.

Scaffolded by plentiful models, with increased opportunities to write emails regularly, Sylvia’s emails become more proficient.

Sylvia had her second turning point when Nicole and other non-native speaker members joined the Benkyōkai. Sylvia changed her role, as Shinji wrote:

I felt that Sylvia might have changed her role in two ways. First, she could be a role model especially for Nicole, DD, and Nylee. Second, she began to state her opinions not only as a Japanese language learner but also as a senior member of Benkyōkai.

Sylvia noted that her academic Japanese has improved much by participating in the Benkyōkai practices. She even managed to present her paper in Japanese at a conference on her own. However, her changes appear to go beyond the improvement of academic Japanese. She has established herself as a full-member of the Benkyōkai CoP, acting as a senior member, being a role model for newcomer non-native speakers, and improving her Japanese proficiency in general.

4.2 Nicole

Nicole was an international student who had studied Japanese in China, prior to coming to UNSW. She was enrolled in a Master’s degree in teaching English first, thus when she entered the Master’s program in applied Japanese linguistics, she had had a two-year break from studying Japanese. She was new to UNSW’s Japanese program and didn’t know anyone, she had not studied Japanese for a while so her Japanese was rusty, and the way she learned Japanese in China did not promote impromptu communication. All these factors caused her anxiety in participating in the weekly Benkyōkai meetings. Nicole’s anxiety was noticed by Rinka, Shinji and Jiro. Jiro stated:

In the beginning, Nicole was very tense when she spoke in Japanese.

³ [Insertions] in testimonials are made by the authors.

Nicole only talked when she was asked to do so, and when she spoke, it was as if “*she was reading aloud a written Japanese text.*” (by Shinji). Shinji further noted that Nicole must have felt that she would like to speak Japanese without any grammar mistakes.

Nicole started to understand the Benkyōkai meeting structure and what she was going to research, and started to cope with it by bringing prepared progress reports, and by communicating her thoughts in emails, the medium she could use without anxiety as she could spend time constructing sentences. Nicole changed her own perception:

I recognised myself as a Japanese learner rather than a Japanese user at the beginning. However, Benkyōkai gives me valuable opportunities to practice and use Japanese in real time. The contact hours of Benkyōkai each week are just two hours. However, I get consistent opportunities to practice and use Japanese all through the week.

She lists activities she engages in as follows:

- *speaking in Japanese during Benkyōkai every week;*
- *speaking in Japanese before and after Benkyōkai with Benkyōkai members, e.g. asking for advice regarding research;*
- *collecting research data in Japanese;*
- *reading and replying emails in Japanese;*
- *reading Japanese books, chapters, research journals, and etc.;*
- *reading our wikispaces.*

Nicole further seemed to have had two turning points. Rinka observed the first turning point:

I guess her turning point was when she [Nicole] got married. Actually everyone was surprised. We felt happy because we got to know her better through this event. The Benkyōkai members organised a dinner and prepared a small present to celebrate her wedding. She looked very happy about it. I felt she got closer to Benkyōkai members after this. She started to speak more and enjoy conversations in Japanese. I felt she started to express herself with her own words.

Nicole herself recognised that she has become a member of the Benkyōkai community:

Benkyōkai is acting like a community in which the interaction between its members is not limited to research alone, and the interaction does not only happen during the meeting hours Being one of the members, I feel like I am living in a Japanese community in which I can use Japanese all the time.

Shinji articulated her second turning point:

In addition, the fact that Nylee joined Benkyōkai might have caused the change in Nicole's role and perspective on herself. She was no longer the newest member of Benkyōkai due to Nylee's participation. Thus, Nicole might have felt that she could be a role model for Nylee and participate in Benkyōkai more actively.

Feeling accepted by the members, knowing how her research was progressing, having consistent opportunities to use Japanese, and having a newcomer non-native Japanese speaker as someone she might look after, Nicole became a full-member of the Benkyōkai CoP, who discusses her research in Japanese.

4.3 Nylee

Nylee is the newest non-native Japanese speaker member of Benkyōkai. After completing her degree in Fine Arts at UNSW, she joined Benkyōkai when she started her Honours research in Japanese studies. Unlike other members, she had a different supervisor and her area of research was not in applied or educational linguistics. However, both her supervisor and Benkyōkai supervisor felt that Nylee would benefit from being in the group of research students in Japanese studies. Nylee had been on an exchange and spent some time in Japan, but she had been away from the formal study of Japanese for two years. She was hesitant to speak in Japanese in the beginning.

Just like the case of Nicole, Nylee was nervous about her Japanese and at the same time lost in terms of her research direction. Rinka observed:

It seemed that Nylee san didn't really understand why she joined Benkyōkai in the first place, even didn't know what was going on there. She was always looking at other members' faces and didn't talk much in the beginning. It seemed that she was observing what was happening there and thinking what she could do there.

However, Nylee had two things that other members didn't have. She was a Fine Arts student who had a higher level knowledge than others in computer design and printing. She was, for example, able to help out a member who was struggling with making an A0 size poster into an A4 size printout. In addition, Nylee was the only native English speaker among the regular members of Benkyōkai. This gave her the role of helping other members with their English. Rinka wrote:

She [Nylee] changed when we made the Benkyōkai poster together. Sensei gave her a role as an "Eigo gakari" [a person in charge of English]. It provided her with a way to get involved in the Benkyōkai as well as to contribute to Benkyōkai. It was a turning point for her.

Being valued by other members, constantly exposed to various types of Japanese, being challenged by demanding levels of academic Japanese, and coping with the challenges, Nylee gradually started to speak with confidence. Jiro stated:

Nylee now exhibits confidence in speaking Japanese. She used to leave the sentences unfinished, but now she expresses her meanings well.

Shinji added:

I think that she [Nylee] began to feel more comfortable speaking Japanese and her speaking became smoother. Now she sometimes tells jokes in Japanese.

Nylee came to value the opportunities provided by Benkyōkai, which allows her to observe and participate in Japanese interactions both in speaking and writing. Nylee noted:

One thing I have consistently struggled with during my Japanese study is the usage of keigo [polite and honorific language], and seeing emails that are written in keigo enables me to study the usage of certain expressions more closely, and absorb the knowledge at my own pace.

Nylee observed and absorbed well. She wrote the following email:

皆さん、

今週の勉強会の読み物がメールに添付しました。Methodology と直した Results の部分に皆さんからコメントを頂ければ、助かります！今、まだ Results を書き終わってないので、今日から水曜日まで書いたものを勉強会に持っていってもいいですか？

よろしくお願いいたします。

ナイリー

Dear all,

I attach the reading for the coming study group meeting. I would be grateful if you all could give comments on the Methodology and the revised Results section! As I have not finished writing the Results, would it be all right if I brought the writing I would complete from now on to Wednesday to the study group meeting?

Thank you in advance,

Nylee

Nylee's mail follows the pattern used by other members when they ask the Benkyōkai members to review their writing. It uses appropriate politeness level, while maintaining the friendliness. It contains a single grammatical error, but it does not interfere with communication. Nylee has become

a valuable member of the Benkyōkai CoP, having a clearly defined role as the English expert, while completing her Honours research successfully and speaking in Japanese more confidently.

5. Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Sylvia, Nicole and Nylee transformed themselves from newcomers to full-members of the Benkyōkai CoP. In this process, they shed initial anxiety about Benkyōkai, about speaking in Japanese, and about the research they were to conduct. They made notable improvements in their use of Japanese in the Benkyōkai meetings, over emails and in social occasions. They became familiar with the use of academic Japanese as they read academic papers, discussed Japanese writings and accumulated technical terminologies. Sylvia even managed to present her paper in Japanese at a conference on her own.

Lave and Wenger (1991) describes learning as participation in a CoP. Initially people have to join a community and learn at the periphery. The activities they are involved in, the tasks they do may be less important to the community than others. As they become more competent, they become more involved in the main practices of the particular community. They move from legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) to full participation (p.37).

5.1. Participation Sequence

Based on the concept of LPP, Ohta (1999) proposed a sequence of learning a second language of adult learners, focusing on the acquisition of interactional routines. According to Ohta, interactional routines are “meaningful culturally formulated modes of expression, which facilitate acquisition not only of language structures, but also of embedded cultural concepts” (Ohta 1999: 1495). Ohta’s sequence has four stages as below:

1. Limited peripheral participation
2. Scaffolded participation
3. Repeated participation
4. Expansion of participation.

In order to acquire an interactional routine, learners need to participate in one. In the first stage, they may only participate in the periphery. Limited peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where the learners are approved observers but not primary participants, is an essential element of socialization processes. In learning a new interactional routine, the learners are at first observers, or participate in the routine in a small way. In the second stage, the learners experience scaffolded participation. Scaffolding allows the new learners to progressively participate more actively. Through this process, the new learners develop a basic understanding both of the function of the routine, and the resources needed to practice the routine. In the third stage, through repeated participation, the new learners become able to anticipate how the routine is likely to unfold, and

begin to participate more and more actively. The fourth stage is expansion of participation in the routine to a wider variety of contexts, with deeper understanding of the routine.

This sequence is directly applicable to the process which Nylee, Nicole and Sylvia took part in as described earlier. The weekly Benkyōkai meetings in a way take a similar form to an interactional routine. It has a routine of progress report, main discussion and sharing of plans. Within the meeting, the progress report is a routine, which is conducted every week in a similar manner of the members taking turns briefly reporting on what they have accomplished in the week. Provided that Sylvia was one of the founding members, she participated in the construction of this routine, but Nicole and Nylee, came in as new learners, observed the style and the language of the progress reports given by old-timers, and gave minimal reports in the first stage. In the second stage, Nicole and Nylee used scaffoldings to aid their successful participation in the progress report. Nicole, for instance, initially prepared her report in advance and read it. In the third stage, they listened to old-timers reports and practiced reporting their own progress week after week. Then in the fourth stage, they were able to expand their participation: they sometimes initiated questions towards other members' reports.

Sylvia's participation process in academic discussion in Japanese provides another example. In the first stage, Sylvia was active in other parts of Benkyōkai activities, but was an observer of academic discussions held by PhD student peers and the Benkyōkai supervisor. In the second stage, she used her role as the Japanese language learner as scaffolding and participated in academic discussions. Her life experiences as a Japanese language learner helped her bring academic ideas closer to her and she found a way to have scaffolded participation. Then in the third stage, she not only participated in the weekly discussions, but also prepared for the discussions by reading research articles both in English and Japanese, and she practiced writing on wikispace, as well as in emails, repeatedly. Her reading in English acted as further scaffolding to aid understanding of Japanese articles. In the final stage, she expanded her participation to the point of delivering a conference presentation in Japanese. She is a full-member of the Benkyōkai CoP, and goes beyond the Benkyōkai boundary. She is a full-member of a Japanese language and linguistics research community.

5.2 Participation as the whole person

Lave and Wenger (1991) maintains that 'learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world' (p.49). Sylvia, Nicole and Nylee's Japanese language uses and subsequent improvements are closely intertwined with their development as researchers and with the development of relationships with other members of the Benkyōkai CoP.

Joining Benkyōkai is intimidating for all new research students no matter what their language levels are. Native Japanese speaker newcomers experience similar anxiety faced with seasoned PhD students and the Benkyōkai supervisors who speak with technical and academic terminologies. They also need to figure out how this Benkyōkai system works, as well as how the new research degree they entered unfolds. Shinji rightfully noted:

I guess that the difficult part for her [Sylvia] in Benkyōkai was that she had to be familiar with the specific academic terms and concepts we used in Benkyōkai meetings (it has also been difficult for all of us so it might not be appropriate to say that she has difficulties because she is a learner of Japanese language).

Sylvia, Nicole and Nylee were learning what to do, what to say and how to say it at the same time as they progressively participated in the Benkyōkai CoP. Their Japanese language use only appears when they have things to say, and when they have tasks to practice.

The opportunities to bring about their language use appear to be related to the turning points discussed above. For all three of them, turning points came when they changed their relationships with other members. Sylvia experienced her first turning point when she positioned herself as the Japanese language learner in relation to other native-speaker members. Nylee experienced her turning point when she was given the role of the English expert of the community, and members started to depend on her expertise. Nicole had a turning point when she found that the members cared enough to celebrate her wedding, and she opened up. When newcomer non-native speakers joined Benkyōkai, both Sylvia and Nicole found their roles change from the junior member to the senior member who mentors newcomers. As Lave and Wenger notes, the focus is on the ways in which learning is ‘an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations’ (p.50).

Sylvia, Nicole and Nylee developed their Japanese: Sylvia developed her academic Japanese; Nicole developed her spontaneous Japanese; and Nylee developed politeness and honorific Japanese. They did so as they progressed as research students, and as they developed various types of relationships within the Benkyōkai CoP, cultivating roles suitable for each of them.

6. Concluding Remarks

We have observed three non-native Japanese speaker research students in Japanese studies at an Australian university. In the Australian system, such students often face two common problems of isolation and difficulty of Japanese language maintenance. However the three students were members of the Benkyōkai community of practice, which provided opportunities to develop relationships with peer research students, develop various types of Japanese language, and establish themselves as researchers, through constant participation in diverse practices.

We set out trying to understand how a CoP operationalises the learning of Japanese. It turns out that the CoP does not operationalise the learning of Japanese in isolation. The learning of Japanese is one of the many outcomes of intertwined practices that are happening and evolving in the Benkyōkai CoP. But for this CoP, being a “Japanese-speaking” researcher is a key component, which distinguishes the members’ identity from others. In conclusion, we share Jiro’s statement:

Sylvia and Nylee talk to each other in Japanese at our meetings. When I hear them talk in English at other functions, it sounds refreshingly new. Probably for me, their situated use of Japanese has become more natural. I feel more at ease to speak to them in Japanese than in

English. I wonder if the Japanese language has-come to serve a function of unifying the group.

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our appreciation to the members, past and present, of the UNSW Benkyōkai, and the members of the wider UNSW Japanese Community of Practice, who have given constant and valuable support to us, not only for writing this particular paper, but for all aspects of our university life. But of course, we are solely responsible for all errors and misinterpretations that might appear in this paper.

References

- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ohta, A. S. (1999) Interactional routines and the socialization of interactional style in adult learners of Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31(11), 1493-1512.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Community of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2006). *Communities of practice a brief introduction*. Retrieved from http://www.ewenger.com/theory/communities_of_practice_intro.htm.

About the Authors

Chihiro Kinoshita Thomson is a Professor of Japanese studies at the University of New South Wales. Her research interest is in Japanese language education in general, and more specifically in Japanese language learners. She writes widely on learner autonomy, learner agency and learner languages, and her papers have appeared in *Japanese Studies*, *Nihongo Kyoiku*, *Sekai no Nihongo Kyoiku*, and other journals.

Sally Chan is a PhD student of Japanese studies at the University of New South Wales. She completed her Honours thesis on the issue of acquisition of a Japanese modifier 'no' by Chinese learners of Japanese. She continues her PhD research on the second language acquisition of Japanese by Chinese learners. Her paper is due to appear in the *New Voices*.