CHANGING IDENTITIES IN AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY IN THE EFL CONTEXT
—A use of Moodle in a Japanese college English class—

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オンライン学習共同体における EFL 学習者のアイデンティティの変容
—日本の大学における英語授業へのムードルの応用—

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本研究は，CMC（コンピュータを媒介としたコミュニケーション）をEFL（外国語としての英語）学習環境へ応用し，学習者がどのようにコミュニティを構築し，自らのアイデンティティを変容させているかを探求することを目的としている。Moodleというコース管理システムを大学の一般教養科目の英語の授業の中で使用し，社会文化理論，特にWenger（1998）の実践共同体理論に基づいてオンライン上でのディスカッションを質的に分析した。オンライン活動によって，コミュニティを形成しながら，学習者が他のコミュニティへの帰属意識を持ち始めることによって，アイデンティティが変容するという結果を得た。

キーワード：オンライン学習共同体，アイデンティティ，社会文化理論，Moodle

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in integration of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) into language education. Focusing on human-to-human communication via computer network rather than human-to-computer communication facilitated by conventional Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), CMC and web-based language learning can provide students with powerful learning tools which enable them to have meaningful learning activities through target language, thereby facilitating their second language (L2) development. Whereas much attention has been paid to the effect of online language learning, research on the construction of the on-line community and learners' identities, especially in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, has remained largely marginalized. Thus, in order to fully understand the relationship between technology and language learning, research paradigms should be expanded to "engage in critical qualitative research, which takes into account broad sociocultual factors as well as issues of human agency, identity and meaning" (Warschauer, 1998, p.760). This study, therefore, explores the application of CMC technologies in the EFL context where participants jointly create a virtual learning community and simultaneously construct their own identities. For this purpose, a free web-based course management system (CMS) called Moodle was used in a general English class at a Japanese college. The study is based on sociocultrual theory of language learning, especially Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) theory.

We will first briefly review the research that motivates this investigation. We will then turn to the theoretical framework for the current study. Through a qualitative analysis of the data obtained from the Moodle interactions, we will present the findings and some implications for future research.

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2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

2.1 Language learning as social participation and collaboration

The recent trend of second language acquisition lays emphasis on language learning as social participation. Underpinning this new trend is soiciocultural approach, which argues that language learning is socially situated practice, taking place first on the interpersonal level and then on the intrapersonal level. Unlike traditional language learning as Acquisition Metaphor (AM), Pavlenko & Lantolf use Participation Metaphor (PM), viewing language learning as a process of participating in and becoming a member of a certain community, which entails "the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms" (p.155). (See Sfard, 1998, for further discussion of the two metaphors).

Participation without collaboration will not be of much value in language learning. This is because language learning is also a collaborative process (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2000). Collaborative language learning has been advocated by its proponents as a means by which learners can be engaged in joint problem solving, knowledge building and identity construction. According to Donato (2004), "Collaboration is a powerful concept that moves us beyond reductive input-output models of interaction and acknowledges the importance of goals, the mutuality of learning in activity, and collective human relationships" (pp. 299-300). He also addresses its relationship with community and identity, arguing that collaboration can encourage learners to become contributing members of a community and thus help sustain and develop the community.

In order to enhance and sustain learners' participation and collaboration, language teachers should be responsible for facilitating the emergence of supportive learning communities, in which learners can be encouraged to collaboratively engage in meaningful and purposeful joint activities and "represent their voices and identities" (Canagarajah, 2006, p.27). Kumaravadivelu (2006) emphasizes the importance of helping "learners in the formation of learning communities where they develop into unified, socially cohesive, mutually supportive groups seeking self-awareness and self-improvement" (p.178).

There has been a growing emphasis recently on the relationship between language learning, community and identity (Norton, 1995, 1997; Kramsch, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Based on the sociocultural conception, identity is characterized as situated, temporal, changing and dynamic vis-à-vis a certain community or a number of communities. It can be constantly constructed, negotiated and transformed (Norton, 1995, 1997; Wenger, 1998). This is in contrast to the traditional way of either defining identity as innate or inherent human quality or perceiving it as stable trait over time under constant testing conditions (See James, 1950; Erikson, 1959; Michel, 1976).

There is general agreement among researchers that language, identity and community are mutually constitutive and entail each other. First, language constructs and is needed by community. The use of the common language facilitates the sharing of the participants' previously held knowledge and the construction of new meanings, thereby facilitating the emergence of a community. The existence of the community, in turn, helps learners avail themselves of the community resources and the opportunities for negotiation of meaning, and thus enhance their language competence. Second, language is "constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's identity (Norton, 1995)". Weeden (1997) argues that "language is the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.71). Thus, language is where one's social identity is constructed and manifested and this identity also in turn determines what kind of language one produces. Third, "building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities (Wenger, 1998)". Social identity is understood in the community, without which identity is meaningless.

The theory of Communities of Practice founded by Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) can provide important insights for the creation of such learning communities, in which learners construct their identities using the target language. Lave and Wenger (1991) define community of practice as "a set of relations among persons,

activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (1991, p.98). Based on this, Wenger (1998) emphasizes the association between practice and community, showing how communities are coherent through their practices.

2.2 Research on CMC

In his recent literature review, Kern (2006) summarizes the role of CALL in terms of three metaphors: tutor, tool and medium. By medium, he argues "technology provides sites for interpersonal communication, multimedia publication, distance learning, community participation and identity formation" (p.192). This way of using technology reflects the new stage of CALL development, with CMC as its forefront. Not until the advent of effective CMC was it possible to use computers for genuine communication.

In China and Japan, where most EFL classes focus more on linguistic forms and less on meaningful interactions due to large class size and examination-oriented educational context, CMC can provide EFL learners with an alternative way of using English for a meaningful purpose. More and more researchers in China have realized the importance of collaborative language learning in online environment (Li, 2006; Zhang, 2006; Zhao & McConnell, 2007). Similarly, in Japan there has been an increasing interest in using CMC technologies for language teaching and learning purposes through intercultural communication (e.g., Saito & Ishizuka, 2005; Tanaka, 2005).

CMC has been found to have a number of beneficial features, which make it a good tool for language learning. For example, it reflects both reflective and interactional aspects of language (Warschauer, 1997), gives participants more time and opportunities to express themselves well at their own pace, and provides a learning environment with lower anxiety (Perez, 2003). Apart from the cognitive benefits, studies have shown that CMC can bring many social benefits. For example, asynchronous medium offers both one-to-one and many-to-many communication channels, and thus multiplies opportunities to share and exchange diverse points of view among the participants.

Many studies support the notion of CMC as a socially and culturally rich environment (Cole, McCarthy Raffier, Rogan, & Schleicher, 1998; Wegerif, 1998; Davis & Thiede, 2000; Arnold & Ducate, 2006), and researchers have begun to argue for increased consideration of sociocultual factors in analyzing the online interaction (Warschauer 2000, 2005; Belz, 2002; Thorne, 2003; Lee, 2004, 2005). Studies suggest that participants, through CMC technologies, not only interact with each other for carrying out an assigned task, but more importantly they tune relationship with each other and with the world in the target language. In other words, their participation in electronic discussion is no longer a linguistic training, but a cultural and social practice (Hanna & Nooy, 2003).

Social aspect is the crucial dimension of a virtual learning community. The emergence of web learning environments like WebCT and Moodle has made it possible for learners to form virtual learning communities. Whereas a wide range of researchers (e.g. Rogers, 2000; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006; Potts, 2006) have begun to show their interest in the creation of virtual communities as basis for better learning condition, very little attention has been paid to the construction of identities and the role it might play on SLA. Warschauer (2000) argues that 'the Internet appears to be a particular important medium for fostering the exploration and expression of cultural and social identity' (p.56). From an ecological perspective of language learning, Lam (2004) investigated how bilingual English/Chinese chat room provides an additional context for language socialization and identity formation. Wildner-Bassett (2005) found that by initiating and supporting critical social-constructivist learning ecology, "all participants' multiple identities and cultural positioning can be expressed with the temporal and spatial independence offered by CMC" (p.654). Nguyen & Kellogg (2005) examined issues of identity in L2 learning through the analysis of online postings in a content-based class as participants argue over gay rights and homosexuality.

Learners' identities in all these studies are addressed without attending to the community construction and development. As mentioned

previously, community and identity are mutually constitutive (Wenger, 1998). They are the two sides of the same coin. In order to fully understand one, we can not ignore the other. Thus, this study will explore learners' changing identities in the emergent online learning community in an EFL context. More specifically, the study will address the following questions:

1. How do EFL learners collaborate with each other on the Moodle?
2. How do they eventually create a community through Moodle tasks and transform their identities?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We will employ Wenger's Communities of Practice theory as our framework to analyze the interactions in the online learning environment. Our data analysis will focus on the flow of the discussion and the categories emerging from the interactions.

According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice has three important dimensions: mutual engagement (how it functions), shared repertoire (what capacity it has produced) and joint enterprise (what it is about). Through mutual engagement, members interact with each other in many ways for a common endeavor, referred to as *joint enterprise*. In this 'doing together', they develop a *shared repertoire* of common resources of language, ways of doing, artifacts and concepts, by means of which they express their identities as members of the group. Participation and identity formation in communities become the fundamental process of learning. Membership constitutes their identity through the competence that it entails. A community of practice can become a learning community only when the tension is kept alive between this competence and their experience. Identity formation is a dual process consisting of identification and negotiability. By identification, participants invest the self in relations of affiliation and distinction, and thus obtain their membership. By negotiability, they control over the meanings in which they are invested.

4. METHODOLOGY
4.1 Context

The exploratory study is set within the context of a general English course at a college level in Japan. 28 sophomores (all were Japanese except one Korean) were enrolled in the course, whose objective is to improve students' basic discussion skills in English based on a textbook titled *Discussion Matters*. Lessons were given twice a week for a 15-week semester, with each lasting 90 minutes. Moodle was used as an adjunct to the mainstream face-to-face class with the aim of creating a virtual community, where learners can interact with each other meaningfully in the target language (see Figure 1). Through various tasks, students were encouraged to have discussions and debates via Moodle. They were told that 20 percent of the course grade would be assigned to the online interaction based on the quantity and quality of their postings.

4.2 Moodle

Unlike most tool-centered commercial CMS systems, Moodle is learning-centered, building the tools into an interface that centers the learning task. It is also an Open Source software package, which can be redistributed for free and its source code is open for further development. One of the main theoretical underpinnings behind Moodle is social constructivism proposing that "the focus (of Moodle) is not on delivering information; it's on sharing ideas and engaging in the construction of knowledge" (Cole, 2005, p.5). By using Moodle installed in a web server, educators can create a course website and exercise access control, providing an easy way to upload and share handouts and materials, hold online discussions, give quizzes and surveys, and record students' grades. Registered students can also create their own web pages on the course site. Thus, Moodle has a great potential for the construction of online communities, in which learners learn to work collaboratively with others by sharing responsibility for negotiating meaning, and jointly constructing knowledge. This is in line with our purpose of fostering collaborative language learning through community building for EFL learners

4.3 Task

Altogether six Moodle tasks were provided with each lasting about three or four weeks. They are as follows:

Task 1: Self-introduction

Task 2: Definition of 'janken' (or 'rock, paper, scissors' in English)

Task 3: Closed debate (Our town is a good place to live in.)

Task 4: Discussion (If you were Mayor, what would you change?)

Task 5: Comments on video-taped in-class speech (conducted simultaneously with Task 4 and Task 6)

Task 6: Open debate

Task 4 was the focus in this study and a qualitative analysis was conducted on the interactions the task invoked. Our aim of the study was to create a virtual community as a supplement of the face-to-face class where learners can experience the instances of using the target language meaningfully. To this end, we thought of some ways of giving students a sense of belonging when designing the Moodle interface. For example, we put up the class picture at the top of the site (see Figure 1). We also let students introduce each other by posting to the forum (Task 1). After completing two closed tasks (Tasks 2 and 3), Task 4 was assigned when we felt sure that students had become familiar with this new space for language learning. Students were given the ownership of the process as the topics were left open for discussion and negotiation. Task 4 was a discussion task titled "If you were Mayor, what you would do to improve the life in the town?" The students had already discussed whether the town, where their college was located, was a good place for them to live in (Task 3, a closed task).They might be familiar with the topic in this further task after having this learning experience on the Moodle. Students were divided into four groups and a discussion forum was provided for each group on the Moodle. In order to avoid some misunderstandings and confusions among the students, we allowed students to look at the discussions only within their own groups before they completed the task.

4.4 Data analysis

After closing the discussion forums, all the posted messages were downloaded for further analysis. Through the comparison of the 4 groups, we found that the members of Group A posted the largest number of messages among all the groups. Altogether, the members in this group posted 29 messages containing 225 complete sentences under Task 4. As the dynamics of the group exchange or collaboration should be identified through detailed analysis of the data, we decided to focus on this group as a unit for analysis so that we could find in details how its members would collaborate with each other to complete the task. This was in line with our original plan, that is, to find out if any community could emerge from the four groups.

As a method of analysis, we decided to employ a qualitative data-driven method. That is, instead of assigning predetermined categories, we first segmented each message posted by the group into discrete sentences, which were then examined and coded in a qualitative way. Then, the first author and the second author discussed until we reached 100% agreement upon the coding of the data. The following example shows how students' postings were segmented and coded:

Excerpt1 (from Learner A's posting No.5 12 June 2006, 01:20)

Hi! [**Greeting**] I agree with Hasegawa's opinion. [**Agreement**] Yashiro is attractive because of its nature. The cherry blossoms in spring and the

Figure 1. Moodle course site

changing leaves in autumn are so pretty. It is a good idea to develop tourism so that Yashiro will attract more tourists to enjoy its beautiful scenery. [New opinion] In this way, not only is nature protected, but also the economy will be developed and Yashiro will get its fame. [Reason] Looking forward to your replies! [Inviting opinions]

(bold type and parenthesis mine)

By segmenting each posting, we analyzed how students progressed through the discussion towards the common values and goals. More importantly, we examined how they interacted with each other and how their interaction facilitated the emergence of the community, in which they eventually transformed their identities.

We will now take a closer look at how learners in the group proceed with their discussion. As Figure 2 shows, when the task was assigned, the discussion started with the first initial posting bringing about the transportation issue. The participant, who made this posting, stated that he would improve the transportation if he were mayor. In response to this posting, almost all the other participants showed their agreement and three possible solutions were provided. The three solutions were "school bus service", "weekend bus service" and "city-bus service". Opinions were divided on the three solutions, with some supporting them and others doubting their practicality. Besides transportation, one participant mentioned the need to build convenience stores near the university in order to make shopping more convenient for students. It can be concluded from the evidence that all of the students argued over the issue from their own point of view. They were only concerned with what was

convenient for them as students. Interestingly, one participant made a posting containing a proposal beyond students' point of view arguing that car accidents and air pollution should be decreased. However, she didn't further clarify her opinion but returned to her student's perspective in her subsequent posting, arguing that mayor's job is to build a students' "paradise town".

Evidence shows a big change in their perspectives in the later stage of the discussion. Three postings might be considered to have contributed to this change. First, one student posted a message doubting the possibility of the students' paradise town. Second, the instructor participated in order to facilitate by validating the contributions and posing an open-ended question. The direct catalyst was the posting made by a student suggesting the necessity of expanding the perspectives. His motive (according to his posting) was from his experience in the face-to-face class, in which a similar topic was picked up from the textbook and opinions were invited from different perspectives. This helped him gain a new insight for the ongoing discussion. His posting triggered a series of positive responses made by other participants, who came to realize that they were not only students in the college, but also student teachers, members of the local community, and so on. They began to bring in their knowledge obtained from experiences outside the university to formulate their own opinions taking into account the town, its people and environment. For example, one participant suggested the need of delivery service, which might benefit the senior citizens.

Table 1. Emerging Categories

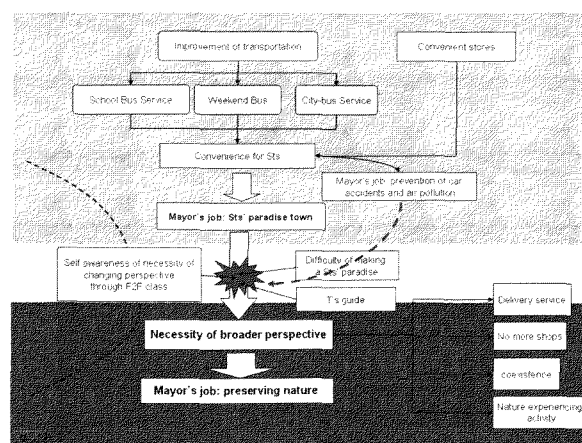| Category	Number
Praising	11
Greeting	5
Recognition	4
Agreement	13
Disagreement or doubt	9
Self criticism	2
New opinions+ reasons	20
Inviting opinions	17

Figure 2. Flow of discussion

Another participant who had suggested building more convenient stores near the university later denied her own proposal as she thought it might trouble the neighbors. Others mentioned the coexistence of people and nature through experiences in nature. When choosing between nature and convenience, all the participants agreed nature was the most important. They stated that convenience is secondary and they don't want the convenience if it can not reconcile with nature. Thus, consensus has finally been arrived at on the mayor's job of preserving nature. As illustrated from the figure, this is in contrast to the original one of building students' paradise town.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, we will discuss the findings through qualitative analysis in accordance with the framework of Wenger's CoP theory. The three findings are 1) from displaying knowledge to cultural practice, 2) the emergence of a learning community and 3) the construction and transformation of identities.

5.1 From displaying knowledge to cultural practice

It is evident that Moodle provided students with a new way of writing - writing as a cultural practice1 (e.g., Rogiff, 1995), which is different from traditional way of writing - writing as displaying knowledge. In F2F class, learners' purpose of writing is for teacher's check or evaluation, which is focused on language form rather than meaning. Their writings are isolated in nature and can only be read by the teacher as an evaluator. The correction based on teacher's feedback marks the end of the writing process. One learner's work has no or little connection with that of others. In a word, they write just for displaying knowledge. By contrast, evidence shows that the learning environment via Moodle entailed a new way of writing - writing for a meaningful purpose. This was because they wrote as a cultural practice, involving a way of being in the world. Their writings had a wider audience, and they worked towards making their own voices heard, and their contributions recognized by the other participants. This gave rise to addressivity and authenticity of

their writing. Thus, they participated not just as a way of doing the group work, but also a way of communicating who they are as individual participants in relation to the community. They brought in their own values and beliefs based on their own background and experience in the lived world and shared them with others. In other words, they translated who they are into their writing, thereby expressing and developing their identities. This process of collective learning can be characterized as "use value" - writing for genuine communication, which is different from the conventional process of learning as "exchange value"[2] - writing for evaluation. Accordingly, the teacher's role also changes from an authoritative evaluator assessing and commenting writing itself to a facilitative guide helping to engage learners in communicating with each other for a meaningful purpose. This new way of writing provides learners with opportunities to experience meaningful use of English within a socially situated context.

5.2 Emergence of a learning community

Another notable finding of this study is the emergence of an online learning community. We approached the data through the lens of Wenger's three dimensions of a Community of Practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. They were used as the criteria for determining the existence of this online learning community. We found the three characters of a CoP were present in the online learning environment.

Mutual engagement was characterized as mutual support, respect, and trust. In the process of working towards the goal of "finding ways of improving life in the town", students engaged and motivated each other, and their contributions were valued as important resources. This can be shown from the high ratio of *agreement* (13), *praising* (11) and *inviting opinions* (17) obtained from the data (see Table 1). The following message is one example showing their mutual engagement:

Excerpt 2 (from Learner B's posting, No.24, 6 July 2006, 01:08)
Hello ☺ conveniece stores and deliverise services are nice ideas. I think that most important things is coexistence (kyouzonn).We should protect

nature and our life. So we must try to change disdvantage to advantage. what do you think?????

As shown in the excerpt above, following the greeting to the other members, Learner B expressed her appreciation of the ideas proposed in the previous messages, showing that she valued the contributions from the other participants. After stating her own opinion, she ended her message with the invitation of comments from the other members. The exaggerated use of the five question marks suggests her eagerness to receive responses. The way she began and ended her message demonstrates that her work was correlated with those of others and thus becomes part of the whole. In so doing, they were involved as interested parties, engaged their identities and created a sense of belonging. Thus, participants could benefit not just from their own investment, but more importantly from the investment of others and from this doing together. Consequently, the positive relationship that the interaction entailed enhanced their mutual engagement among those involved.

The presence of a joint enterprise was proved by the constant negotiation and renegotiation of the goal, and the accountability for mutually achieving the goal. Data show participants negotiated and renegotiated the goal to keep it on track. For example, realizing that the ongoing discussion was off the task, one participant posted the following message:

Excerpt 3 (from Learner C's posting No. 22, 5 July 2006, 12:13)
We attended today['s] class, and I think that it is necessary [to] change the perspective for us. Because these are our hope to students aspect rather than the opinion to mayor aspect. Therefore, I will make a different opinion···

This indicates that they collaboratively built up the knowledge and negotiated meaning for the common goal. Nonetheless, there was not always peace and harmony in this doing together. For example, showing his disagreement with another student's proposal of "building a students' paradise town by setting up more shops", one participant argued:

Excerpt 4 (from Learner D's posting, No. 20, 1 July 2006, 12:54)
... I think paradise town for students fails. If you will keep managing paradise town for students, what [shop do] you open and how do you di [guarantee] the profit is raised and the shop is continued?

His disagreement was followed by a thought-provoking question, inviting the others to reconsider the proposal taking into account its practicality. This message shows the participants did not always blindly comply with every proposal presented in the forum. They were trying to negotiate for the appropriateness of these proposals. In fact, disagreement and doubt in the forum proved to be a productive part of the enterprise, and they were crucial as they revealed "a greater commitment than does passive conformity" (Wenger, 1998, p.77). Through negotiation, the participants developed a collective understanding of and mutual accountability for their joint enterprise, thereby facilitating the emergence of shared perspectives and a sense of belonging.

The existence of a shared repertoire was mainly reflected from the shared resources available for their communicative purposes. Two types of resources can be identified in the online learning environment, namely preexistent resources and emerging resources. Preexistent resources refer to different kinds of tools (e.g., online dictionary, glossary) built in the Moodle interface, from which learners chose for their online activities. They also refer to the shared background knowledge of the place where the participants live and study (e.g., the inconvenience of the town). Emerging resources are the resources learners developed for negotiation of meaning through their joint pursuit of the common goal over time. As the created resources are permanently recorded in the forum, they could be revisited, reflected on, appropriated and argued over for both their individual goals and the collective goal. These resources consist of opinions, vocabulary, and ways of addressing each other. For example, a shared vocabulary emerged as the result of their interactions, including words like *transportation, delivery service, weekend bus service, convenience stores, school bus service,*

students' paradise town, environment, and *pollution.* The resources not only reflected a history of the mutual engagement but also provided possibility for their future engagement. The shared repertoire became the common points of reference and helped to form the boundary of the community.

Thus, with the discussion unfolding, a learning community emerged in a discursive and situated context. In this learning community, where learners were socially involved, the responsibility for learning was shared, new meanings were developed, and knowledge was collaboratively constructed among group members. They each used their own knowledge and skills and jointly built new knowledge to contribute to the community endeavor. The experience of working on a task with others helped learners develop a rich repertoire of learning processes and made them feel that they had a stake in the community. As stated previously, in a learning community there is always tension between learners' competence and experience. This can be identified in the emergent community. Learners' experience of participating in the community entailed the improvement of their competence as a member, and the improved competence in turn facilitated better participation. In a word, learners' experience and competence served each other along the cycle of development of the community of practice.

It is worth mentioning that the discussion in this group lasted for another few days after the task was supposed to be closed. This is consistent with Wenger's following statement:

> ···it is not so clear where they (communities) begin and end. They don't have launching and dismissal dates··· Based on joint learning rather than reified tasks that begin and end, a community of practice takes a while to come into being, and it can linger after an official group disbanded. (Wenger, 1997)

Consequently, the learning community, as can be inferred from the statement above, emerged from the cracks of the planned design and remained distinct from it. Furthermore, the group product resulted from negotiation process amongst the participants rather than the predetermined design.

Thus, the learning that took place in the present study is in line with Wenger's argument that "learning cannot be designed: it can only be designed for-that is, facilitated or frustrated" (Wenger, 1998, p. 229).

The symmetrical relationship between the instructor and the learners contributed to the emergence of the community. This relationship is illustrated by the following message in the forum. In this example, the instructor posted in response to one student's proposal of having a school bus service:

Excerpt 5 (from Instructor's posting, No.8, 17 June 2006 09:41)
Tairo, thanks for your contribution.
Having a school bus service sounds very nice. Actually, some private universities run their own buses. However, this means that the cost of the service must be included in your tuition fee. You may think that those who would take the bus service should pay by themselves, but maintaining the service (including drivers, car maintenance, fuels etc.) would cost much more. What do you think?

The message above shows that the instructor did not push his opinion on the student. Instead, he first praised the student's idea and then expressed his personal view that the proposal would be hard to carry out due to the high cost. Finally, he ended his message with the invitation to comment. In so doing, the issue was still left open for learners to develop their own ideas. It is safe to say, from the message above, that the instructor assumed "a facilitative role rather than the instructive role" (Hinkelman, 2004, p. 968) when participating in the online discussion, providing resources, sharing the opinions, and inviting contributions. He positioned himself as an equal member working with the learners for the common enterprise. The parallel power relationship between the instructor and learners presented in the forum, different from conventional vertical power relationship, no doubt promoted the learners' participation. It is important to note that the participants developed their own norms of participation in this emergent community rather than follow the prescriptive ones. It is

evident that learners did not always align with the instructor and TA's opinions. They sometimes questioned and doubted them or even ignored them. The instructor's role facilitated the learners' easy access to the online discussion and helped create a safe environment, which gives students empowerment and a sense of belonging over the virtual space

In this virtual learning community, the focus was on experience of meaning rather than mechanics of learning. It provided opportunities for learners to maintain meaningful connections and developed culturally and linguistically appropriate techniques to project voice and identity.

5.3 Construction and transformation of identities

Along with the emergence of the learning community was the construction and transformation of learners' identities. As mentioned previously, identity formation is a dual process consisting of identification and negotiability (Wenger, 1998).

This process can be identified in the *Moodle* discussion. Different from face-to-face environment, members in the virtual environment had to send messages to the forum to show their existence. As Table 1 indicates, *greeting, agreement* and *praising* were frequently shown in their messages. Their *disagreement* and *doubt* were indirect and based on the appreciation and recognition of others' opinions. In so doing, they not only showed their own presence but also presented their consciousness of the other members' existence and the common goal of their doing together. Thus, they identified themselves and others with the community identity. This reflects a very important dimension of identity formation - identification. By identification, participants invested themselves in the community and thus established their membership status.

Identification is just part of the picture. In addition, they had to endeavor to claim some say in the ongoing discussion. Based on agreement or disagreement with the previous postings, they proposed their own opinions followed by reasons and examples. Besides, they usually ended their messages with the invitation for contributions from the other members. This showed the other important dimension of identity formation -

negotiability. By negotiability, the participants tried to influence the meanings invested in the community to claim the ownership of the meaning. This can also be reflected from some strategies they employed. For example, they used code switching (*taikennkyoushitu; arigatai; kyozon; akaji*) to further clarify their assertions, as they were afraid their English might not reach the other learners' understanding. Among other strategies are exaggerated use of punctuations and emoticons. All this illustrates how they were struggling to make themselves understood and their voices heard. In so doing, they managed to establish themselves and be recognized as legitimate and increasingly competent members of the community. To sum up, they were engaged in identity construction and negotiation by constantly reflecting on who they were vis-à-vis the community in which they were practicing members.

Seen in this light, the way they interpreted the issue was negotiated in the course of interaction with each other, neither simply their individual choices nor simply the result of belonging to the community. Thus, the meanings produced in the socially situated community and their ability to negotiate them became part of who they are, and the negotiated nature of the interactions showed how they related to the community. Identification gave members material to define their identities; negotiability enabled them to use this material to assert their identities as productive of meaning; and they weaved these two threads into the social fabric of their identities (Wenger, 1998). The dual process of identity formation enhanced their growing competence as members, thereby enabling them to move towards the core of the learning community. It is important to note that the interaction and reflection enabled by the temporally and spatially unbound Moodle facilitated the easy access to identity formation.

Data also show that this online learning community offers a space for identity transformation. This can be proved by learners' change of perspectives upon the realization of their multimembership during negotiation of meaning. Now through the use of "we", we will analyze how students transformed themselves. Two different types of "we" were identified in the students'

messages: "egocentric we" and "multilayered we". In the earlier postings, the word "we" can be indicative of their identities as college students who live in an inconvenient town asking for a better life. This can be shown from their proposals like "school bus service", "students' paradise town" and so on. Their views and opinions are limited within the confines of the university campus, which could be observed from the following message:

Excerpt 6 (from Learner E`s posting, No. 3, 7 June 2006, 11:31)
I agree with Tairo's and Aya's opinion. Yashiro is located in inconvenient place, so **we** must have cars. It costs too much money to maintain cars for **us**. So if I am Yashiro's mayor, I increase public transport and improve transportation. Besides I need to make more shops near the collage. **We** may not eat any food if I［we］want something to eat. Because college's shop and restaurant close regularly, then **we** don't buy anything to eat if we don't have car. Therefore if I am Yashiro's mayor, I want to make more shops near the college.

(bold type mine)

The message above indicates that this participant was discussing the issue from the point of view of "we" as university students, who only considered the convenience of their own.

In contrast to this egocentric use of "we", the use of "we" in their later postings became multilayered. It was expanded to include their membership in the other communities. As stated previously, the change emerged as the result of their awareness of a narrow perspective, teacher's guide and their experience in the real world. It should be noted here that students joined volunteer activities as part of the curriculum during the period of this online discussion. Through these activities, they had opportunities to contact the local people from all walks of life, which might help them look at the issues brought up in the discussion with a fresh eye. As such, the realization of their multimembership enabled by both their online and offline experiences contributed to the change of their perspectives, and therefore the use of "we". Wenger (1998) states:

Multimembership is a critical source of learning because it forces an alignment of perspective in the negotiation of an engaged identity. Identity then becomes a living bridge to ［…］ bring diverging perspectives together (p.218).

Learners began to reconsider their self in the current community and the other communities they belonged to, and the position of the community in the broader context, thereby integrating other meanings and perspectives into their identities. They began to talk about taxi drivers, bus company managers, shop owners, and the elderly people, and reconsidered the issues in these people's stance. Furthermore, by using "we", some participants included themselves into the local community calling on each other to protect nature even at the sacrifice of their own convenience. The use of "we" in the later stage of the discussion, therefore, reflected their promoted shared values and understandings. The following message reflects this different use of "we":

Excerpt 7 (from Learner C's posting, No. 27, 12 July 2006, 09:57)
Taikengakusyu (nature-experiencing activity) is a nice idea. Certainly important that **we** know nature, and **we** (take) action based on knowledge of nature. But if you want to (have) convenience, I think that **we** can't protect environment. For example, People use cars for movement's convenience, but it destroy environment. If **we** think that **we** must protect environment, I think **we** must receive even inconvenient thing.

(bold type mine)

This message demonstrates, with the deepening of the negotiation, the participants expanded their identities from "we" as students confined in an inconvenient town to "we" as members in the other overlapping communities of the broader context.

As shown in Figure 3, a learner's identity is not limited as a member in Group A, but has been expanded to include his or her other identities in the other communities. For example, he is simultaneously a college student, a student teacher, a resident in a local community and so on. These other identities have helped transform his or her identity
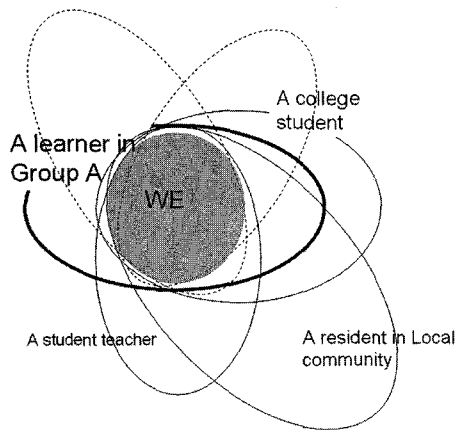
Figure 3. Multi-membership of overlapping communities

in the group and together the participants form a common identity of "we" in a broader context. They began to have a new sense of self vis-à-vis others and the real life world at large. Thus, the virtual community became a special space where learners constructed and negotiated their identities in various levels of communities surrounding them.

5.4 Summary

It can be concluded here that the social and cultural practice using the target language via *Moodle* facilitated the emergence of an online language learning community, in which learners onstructed and transformed their identities. Wenger (1998) argues, "Education, in its deepest sense⋯ concerns the opening of identities-exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state" (p.263). Obviously, the changes facilitated by the online interactions show that learners were constantly improving their competence as members of the community and had transformed themselves by broadening their narrow perspectives towards the issue being discussed. In this sense, they were shaped into a new person looking at the community and the lived world with new eyes. This identity construction and transformation resulted from their sociocultural practice in this emergent learning community, which provided them with "meaningful forms of membership and empowering forms of ownership of meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p.269). They engaged their whole person, and their identities encompassed multiple perspectives in the negotiation of new meanings. Additionally, their online and offline practices provided them with a sense of multimembership of different overlapping

communities and the living experience of their boundaries. Their active and creative process of reconciling the nexus of multimembership gave rise to the identity transformation. Thus, learning and identity served each other in this community. Learning entailed by their membership led the participants from their comfort zone, prejudice and narrowness up to a new level of understanding, new sense of self and new images of the world. By critically reviewing their own identities, they tried to reshape them and eventually transformed them. It should be noted here that language is used as a tool for this identity transforming process and the competence of using the language without doubt is increasing along this process. The growth of both the individuals and the community itself can be identified in the dual process of developing the community and negotiating their identities.

6. CONCLUSION

We have discussed that the application of CMC in the EFL class facilitated the emergence of an online learning community, in which the learners changed their identities. However, it should be acknowledged that this research was conducted under some limitations. For example, we should have included more qualitative data including interviews with the learners. The difficult access to the computer and the Internet might have affected the learners' motivation of participation. Furthermore, the students could not organize their ideas well due to their limited written competence. Therefore, it is suggested that further research should consider using data from various sources in order to ensure the validity. Meanwhile, learners should be provided with an appropriate, engaging task and support must be available to provide learners with ready assistance in monitoring progress.

Three important areas in employing CMC to create virtual communities in which learners construct their identities in the EFL are left for further research. First, we will investigate how we integrate CMC into coherent and continuous curricula. Second, our attention will also be focused on the comparison across different types of tasks. This includes analysis of how the nature of the tasks affects the interaction among the participants

and thus affects their creation of online learning community and their formation of identities. Third, we should explore what role the teacher should play in facilitating the emergence of an online community. We should explore how to identify the contradictions and disruptions of the activity system inside the community so that the innovative changes can be made on the system for its advancement and expansion.

Notes

1 . Newcomers' participation in the community involves "a way of learning-of both absorbing and being absorbed in-the 'culture of practice' " (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.95). Rogoff (1995) also argues that people participate in culturally organized activities of their community, which facilitate their individual development.

2 . "The commoditization of learning engenders a fundamental contradiction between the use and exchange values of the outcome of learning, which manifests itself in conflicts between learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.112).

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