

**LEARNING ABOUT AN OCCUPATION:  
COMMUNICATION, PRACTICES AND PERSONAL QUALITIES EMERGING IN  
CONVERSATIONS WITH APPLIANCE SERVICE TECHNICIANS**

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### **Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essays:**

**Learning About an Occupation: Communication, Practices and Personal Qualities Emerging in Conversations with Appliance Service Technicians**

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## ABSTRACT

My project, *Learning about an occupation: Communication, practices and personal qualities emerging in conversations with appliance service technicians*, developed from my work at Kwantlen University College in Appliance Servicing with English as an Additional Language. This combined-skills, entry-level, trades program included remedial English support for non-native speakers who were training to service and repair large domestic appliances. A key challenge for language instructors in this program was to provide instructional materials which engaged these trades students to willingly invest time and effort on improving their English.

Over a six-month period, students heard recordings of seven interviews with appliance service technicians in the field. After listening to an interview, students recorded themselves talking about the important ideas. These student responses provide evidence that from the interviews, students identified qualities valued in the field and gained insights into workplace attitudes. Their discussions not only gave students practice in negotiating the value of different perspectives, but offered them a means of sharing their concerns about making a successful transition to employment.

The interviews were primarily designed to appeal to Appliance Servicing students and prompt them to improve their fluency with a discussion task, while learning more about the occupation. Literature and research in occupational identities, communities of practice, the transition from college to the workplace, and discursive psychology influenced my interpretation of the student responses. In conclusion, I propose some ways of increasing the value of these recorded interviews for language training.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Approval .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: LEARNING ABOUT AN OCCUPATION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
Occupational identities and communities of practice.....	4
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction.....	7
Identity in transition: From college training to the workplace .....	8
Identity within a community of practice .....	11
Identity in membership: Engagement, imagination, and alignment.....	13
Locating identity in discourse.....	14
Producing identity through discursive action .....	17
Identity and language skills.....	19
Summary.....	20
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Introduction.....	22
Part #1: Interviewing appliance service professionals.....	23
Selecting participants.....	25
Recording the interviews.....	26
Part #2: Transcribing and analysing the interviews.....	27
Part #3: Using the interview tapes with language students .....	28
A listening task.....	28
A response task .....	29
Recording the student responses.....	29
Part #4: Transcribing and analysing the student responses.....	30
Part #5: Evaluating the interview tapes.....	31
Comparing the importance given specific topics .....	31
How language resources were used to establish topic importance .....	31
How individuals positioned themselves and others in discussion .....	32
Conclusion.....	32
<b>CHAPTER 4: DATA.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction.....	33
Topics identified by students.....	33
Topics from the interview with Moe (July 7 <sup>th</sup> , 2000).....	34
Topics from the interview with T.L. (July 17, 2000).....	34
Topics from the interview with Ilia (August 8, 2000) .....	35

Topics from the interview with J.S. (September 20, 2000).....	36
Topics from the interview with R.S. (October 4, 2000) .....	37
Topics from the interview with Doug (October 11, 2000).....	38
Topics from the interview with M.B. (December 12 & 13, 2000) .....	38
Discursive resources students demonstrated in discussion .....	39
How students positioned themselves.....	42
Positioning in the responses to Moe (July 7 <sup>th</sup> , 2000) .....	42
Positioning in the responses to T.L. (July 17, 2000).....	43
Positioning in the responses to Ilia (August 8, 2000).....	43
Positioning in the responses to J.S. (September 20, 2000) .....	43
Positioning in the responses to R.S. (October 4, 2000).....	44
Positioning in the responses to Doug (October 11, 2000) .....	44
Positioning in the responses to M.B. (December 12/13, 2000).....	45
Structure of the task.....	45
Summary .....	46
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Using recorded interviews in the classroom.....	48
Using the interviews to learn about appliance servicing .....	51
Moe interview.....	51
T.L. interview .....	51
Ilia interview .....	51
J.S. interview .....	52
R.S. interview.....	52
Doug interview .....	52
M.B. interview .....	52
S.R.N. interview (not heard by students).....	53
Using the interviews for appliance-service language learning .....	53
Topics students identified.....	54
Discursive resources students used.....	54
Positions students took .....	55
Responses to the structure of the task.....	56
Summary .....	57
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>APPENDIX: ETHICS APPROVAL.....</b>	<b>60</b>

## CHAPTER 1: LEARNING ABOUT AN OCCUPATION

### *Introduction*

This project has emerged from my work with Appliance Servicing (EAL) at Kwantlen University College. The Appliance Servicing (EAL) program offered combined skills, so that non-native speakers who were training to service and repair large domestic appliances could receive remedial language support at the same time.<sup>1</sup> My involvement began with an opportunity to substitute for another English instructor in 1998. I was eager to accept the contract when it was offered in 2000 because teaching in a combined-skills trades program would give me opportunities to apply both my technical background in electrical design and my experience teaching vocational language. I was particularly looking forward to working with students who shared a single, specific career goal. I thought if language learning were considered as part of training for a specific trade, students would easily see the rationale for improving their English skills.

Developing language course materials based on technical training content is a common strategy used in English for Specific Purposes (E.S.P.). Richards (2001) described the supportive function of these specialized instructional materials as facilitating learning and encouraging self-study of specific language and content (p. 252). In the appliance servicing program, language lessons supported the students' technical studies by reinforcing key terminology, concepts, and procedures covered in the technical course. My instructional materials were primarily based on available reference books, core course modules, trades publications, catalogues, and various job-related paperwork.

These various written materials, along with library and Web-based research, readily provided a basis for reading which could also generate writing, speaking, and listening activities. However, written materials did not describe what oral proficiency levels would

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<sup>1</sup> The Appliance Servicing (EAL) program has not been offered since January of 2003. An alternative prerequisite language course for entry-level trades training is currently in development at Kwantlen University College.



be expected from immigrant technicians in appliance servicing. I could anticipate the functional language required for shop work and customer service, but without a background in the field, I could not predict how employers would respond to different accents, pronunciation problems, and grammatical errors in oral production.

Many students in our program had several years of work experience in Canada and demonstrated limited interest in improving their oral communication skills. In their technical training, the students did not seem to receive any feedback on their speaking skills or much information about language use.<sup>2</sup> Scheduled as three classes a week, the English classes for Appliance Servicing were usually held during the last two hours of the six-hour day. I observed that while some students readily alluded to weaknesses with English, they generally would have preferred to spend the time working on appliances in the shop. Even when the language classes focussed directly on the terms and concepts in upcoming appliance tests, some students would indicate a preference for studying alone. This resistance by some students to attending language class contributed to my concerns about providing curriculum that the students would identify as relevant.

As the language instructor, I wanted to gain a better understanding of oral proficiency standards in the appliance servicing field and develop a practical approach to teaching and evaluating speaking and listening skills – an approach that would engage these particular students. My lack of direct work experience in appliance servicing made it difficult for me to be certain about the relative importance of various communication skills. I was also aware that my credibility as a source of information about vocational requirements was also affected by my status as the only female among male instructors

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<sup>2</sup> Listening was emphasized during the appliance lectures, but I received reports from some students that questions were not necessarily welcomed. Also, the technical instructors did not prohibit students from using other languages in the class or shop. I suggest the politics of language use in this kind of training situation needs to be examined. What does it mean to need remedial assistance, and how could these students benefit most while attending the program? How far do we take our responsibility for designing the learning situation so students build their skills? Do we require adult learners to speak English exclusively throughout the training program or should English be optional outside of the language class? I have the impression a number of students over the years may have received a certificate without gaining the oral proficiency to work with confidence in an English-speaking environment, a distinct limitation in a field requiring customer service. I favour efforts to persuade students that speaking English is in their best interests as language learners.

introducing students to a male-dominated field of endeavour. Several of the vocational programs at our College had no required courses in communication skills for native-speakers at the time, and this may have also contributed to a perception that language skills were less important than technical know-how in the trades.

I reasoned that audio samples of interviews with people working in the appliance servicing field could demonstrate authentic workplace language proficiencies. Listening to these samples would give students practice in tuning into different voices and accents. Moreover, information about work could be helpful for students in understanding what they might encounter in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Audio interviews with working technicians would provide answers to some of my questions about the workplace, and the use of their actual voices would contribute to the credibility of the information as far as students were concerned.

Listening to the interviews and recording their responses was the task I designed for the students. By asking students to identify important ideas they had heard, I hoped to provide them with a clear focus for an otherwise open-ended task. My absence from the classroom during many of the group discussions was intended to promote a sense of student autonomy and give them opportunities to practice building their fluency by negotiating meaningful conversation among peers. Furthermore, the student recordings would help me, as their language teacher, to identify the kinds of strengths and weaknesses evident in the students' English communication.

In summary, I expected the recorded interviews with eight technicians in the field to engage the students for some of the same reasons the project attracted me. The people on the tapes spoke from personal experience, so they had credible information about working conditions in the appliance servicing field. Even though the interview format would not duplicate authentic exchanges in the workplace, the interview subjects could represent the fluency, accuracy, and register non-native English speakers might expect

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<sup>3</sup> For example, I had the impression students often entered the Appliance Servicing program without knowing about the entry-level wages they might expect. I had observed some students complete the certificate, but decide not to seek work as an appliance technician. Some commented that the company where they had completed their practicum experience offered the going rate for entry-level shop work which was less than half the salary they had received in their previous resource-based, union jobs.

to encounter in the field. I anticipated the response task would also affect student engagement, even in that the act of recording would require some concentration from group members, thereby contributing to students' attention to the response task.

In terms of language instruction, having students listen to the interviews could have involved any number of activities to strengthen and evaluate listening skills. However, to get a picture of how the students would respond to the recorded interviews, I did not want to direct their attention to specific details or patterns of thought demonstrated on the tape. Students were told they could stop and start the interview tapes to review any part they missed. Moreover, the group response was anticipated to encourage the sharing of individual interpretations so that misunderstandings would be clarified by peers. Since I could monitor the recording of the students' conversations, any misconceptions which remained after the group discussion could be corrected in the class.

A key challenge for language instructors in this kind of combined-skills program is providing instructional materials which engage the students to willingly invest time and effort on improving their English. For this reason, the interviews for this project were primarily designed to elicit student engagement in the classroom. However, I also became interested in how the recorded content might contribute to the students' overall preparation for the workplace. This concern led me to research occupational identities, communities of practice, and the transition from college to the workplace.

### ***Occupational identities and communities of practice***

My interviews with technicians in the field would seem to be of intrinsic interest to appliance servicing trainees, but the type of information shared in the recordings needed to be assessed in the context of job training. My own experience suggested people already employed in a vocational field could provide insights of critical importance to student trainees. Over the years, I have invested time and effort in a number of occupations: babysitter, waitress, reporter, insurance-claims adjuster, salesclerk, researcher, theatrical-lighting designer, electrical draftsman, home-insulation estimator, project manager, business-information clerk, mixed-media sculptor, video producer, teaching assistant, and finally, instructor of English-as-an-additional-language.

Each job provided an entry point to an occupation, an opportunity to develop specific skills and a new work identity.

My initial training for these jobs ranged from site-specific instruction by co-workers and employers to educational credentials including, two post-secondary certificates, two diplomas, and a degree. However, the training I received for credentials in post-secondary institutions did not necessarily prepare me for workplace conditions.<sup>4</sup> Formal training typically emphasized the introduction of concepts and principles, supporting a variety of possible applications within a given field. In most programs, day-to-day work experiences and attitudes common to members of an occupation were rarely discussed. How people could develop and gain recognition for their expertise was usually not very clear until I found out for myself in the workplace. Yet, the work-related interactions which indicate membership and position may influence how well individuals adjust to conditions of employment and establish an identity in their chosen field.

According to Wenger (1998), our occupational identities develop through interactions we have with others, both on and off the job. Such relationships position us as members of one or more communities of practice. The organized communities related to work have specific, mandated purpose(s) which situate our occupational identities. Members of a community of practice may have the same or different occupations. Individuals who successfully demonstrate expertise as participants may gain positions of advantage in the group. These communities of practice are constantly evolving with the interactions of members. As participants pursue various objectives, their actions change relationships in the group. Ideally, communities of practice provide members with opportunities for mutual engagement in joint enterprises, bonding participants with a common repertoire of experiences and resources (Wenger, 1998).

Consequently, learning about an occupation involves not only an understanding of the kinds of interests, knowledge, and tasks associated with a specific vocation, but insight into how individuals become functioning members of an occupational group and negotiate meaningful identities through their work.

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<sup>4</sup> The exception to this was the excellent teacher training I received in the TESL certificate program.

These issues of entry and identity are particularly important for learners training for a career. A productive community of practice requires effective communications among its members so that individuals may contribute to the shared objectives. Therefore, to learn about an occupation means more than knowing how to apply information to a particular purpose. It involves learning how to be a member of an occupational group as it exists within various communities of practice. Moreover, maintaining one's membership in such a group entails continually negotiating the meanings of practical enterprises. The significance of work-related endeavours can only be determined through interactions with others in the community of practice. Therefore, communication skills become essential for establishing working relationships and participating fully in any community of practice. An individual with effective communication skills, no matter the language, is better equipped to successfully navigate a career path by establishing an identity as a contributing member of the community of practice.

Many types of work today call for formal courses within an institutional setting before individuals are accepted into entry-level positions. In some cases, institutions successfully collaborate with industries to develop customized training, facilitating job placement for graduates.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the process of moving from the confines of a training program and adjusting successfully to the demands of the workplace involves more than specialized technical proficiencies. Wenger's model supports the view that familiarity with the perspectives and concerns of experienced workers could help prepare students for the transition from college to the workplace.

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<sup>5</sup> The British Columbia Institute of Technology and Kwantlen University College have both offered these services.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction*

After recording interviews with eight appliance service technicians, my investigation of existing literature involved searching for similar studies. I needed to identify a means of assessing the value of these particular audiotapes for a language class of trainee-technicians. Listening tapes are often used in language learning to model specific aspects of English usage, provide students with tasks to improve aural perception, or test comprehension (Ur, 1984). Within the context of trades training, I expected the content of these audiotapes would hold special interest for students and provide the incentive for developing their language skills. On an intuitive level, the value of having trainees listen to interviews about work in the field seems indisputable. It stands to reason that working technicians could offer insights derived from personal experiences along with "implicit or tacit knowledge," beyond the scope of textbooks or training manuals (Hung & Nichani, 2002, 180). Nonetheless, while observations by technicians in the field would appear to have educational importance, I was unable to find any other studies that examined the use or evaluation of these kinds of recorded interviews.

Work-related English training is a field that uses the content relevant to a specific area of study for tasks promoting language acquisition. Language courses may be partnered with career training in combined-skills programs or offered as prerequisites with specialized content. Instructional materials for courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are designed to promote the development of skills that contribute to effective participation in workplace tasks and interactions (Richards, 2001). In the context of the combined-skills appliance servicing program, I was looking for a means of assessing the audio recordings as instructional aids for the development of work-related communication skills. Although questionnaires or listening comprehension exercises could have been used to get information about student opinion and comprehension, I was more concerned with discovering how the students would demonstrate their interest in the interviews and how they might manage their discussions if they tried to reach

consensus.<sup>6</sup> This prompted me to use open-ended discussions to learn about the students' attitudes toward the listening activity and the significance they gave the recordings.

Consequently, my evaluation of the interviews has emerged from an analysis of the student responses in small group discussions and the ideas that students described as important or noteworthy. I observed that the ways these students used language in their discussions not only indicated their English skills, but affected the direction the conversations took and the amount of time each group gave various topics. By transcribing the student responses, I could examine how students demonstrated their engagement with the interviews and how they established various ideas as noteworthy. With no similar studies available to guide me, my interpretation of the student discussions has been shaped by literature from four different areas: the transition from college to work, participation in communities of practice, interpretations of discourse used in discursive psychology, and the connection between language training and identity. Theories and research from each of these subject areas have addressed aspects of concern to my study. The following review describes how these different approaches complement each other and contribute to my interpretation of the student responses.

### ***Identity in transition: From college training to the workplace***

Training programs such as Appliance Servicing are intended to give students the skills they need to access entry-level positions in trades. Therefore, the language course associated with this training also had this same objective of preparing students to meet job demands. Meeting this goal is in some respects restricted by the fact that like many other kinds of post-secondary training, our program has been primarily delivered in the college classroom, laboratory, and workshop, rather than in the workplace. School and work situations differ, not only in the locations and the individuals involved, but in the working or learning conditions, tasks, and related interactions. Consequently, the demands on a new employee might normally differ in important ways with the requirements of student life.

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<sup>6</sup> As described in several of the interviews, speaking and listening are particularly important for appliance servicing professionals by comparison with reading and writing skills.

Lave and Wenger(1991) described learning as situated in social practice. Their theory of situated learning is based on the premise that people learn most effectively through their involvements with various *communities of practice*.<sup>7</sup> Specific social practices apply among the network of contacts with whom we interact – those who make up our community of practice in the workplace. These relationships are an integral part of how and what we might do and learn in that particular context. Accordingly, the learning that occurs in classrooms, laboratories, and workshops involves different social interactions than those in workplaces where students might apply their learning. The social practices established between teachers and students or even among student peers are specific to the college context and the parameters set by that institution.<sup>8</sup> Research into organizations that have identified existing communities of practice and established related networking and mentoring units confirms the value of these work-related bonds.<sup>9</sup>

Critics argue that situated learning does not acknowledge the value of transferable skills introduced in a formal educational setting (Fenwick, 2000). They also object that the significance of education outside the work environment is being called into question; pointing out that educational institutions often provide consistency in career training by introducing students to information and skills that they may not have access to in some work situations (Fenwick, 2000). Wenger(1998) has acknowledged that not all workplaces offer many learning opportunities, but rather that “communities of practice constitute elemental social learning structures (and) learning is fundamentally experiential and fundamentally social” (p. 227). “Identity is the vehicle that carries our experiences from context to context” (Wenger, 1998, p. 268). Consequently, educational institutions need to provide “learning of a kind that engages one’s identity in a meaningful trajectory and affords some ownership of meaning” (Wenger, 1998, p.

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<sup>7</sup> “A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29)

<sup>8</sup> Since my study, some young students confirmed their awareness of different situations by explaining that their disruptive behaviour in the language class was no indication of their attitude toward work in appliance servicing.

<sup>9</sup> Seven companies, ranging from financial institutions to manufacturers, participated in a study in which communities of practice within the organizations were formally identified and encouraged to establish more effective networking procedures. The results were that new employees, identifying with organizational objectives, learned more quickly the requirements for effective participation, and overall improvements in organizational performance were observed (Lesser & Storck, 2001).



270). In other words, knowledge offered through educational institutions needs to be explicitly related to contexts and practices outside of the classroom if institution-based learning is to carry meaning for students beyond the practices of the school.

Even when the training received is viewed as appropriate workplace preparation, the actual conditions in a workplace may restrict the novice's opportunities to apply knowledge that has not been previously demonstrated on the job. Lave and Wenger(1991) described new employees as *legitimate peripheral participants* who still need to learn about the practices in their workplace community. To interact effectively on the job, new employees must adopt the attitudes and patterns of behaviour that are appropriate to their position within the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). At the same time, the individual's ability to establish a positive, work-related identity through participation tends to influence opportunities for advancement that only then may require the use of formal 'institution-based' training in the workplace.<sup>10</sup> Moving into an employment field involves more than just demonstrating specialized knowledge and skills.

Even when students view their education as effective preparation for the workplace, concerns related to identity can be a barrier. Entry-level participation in a workplace is likely to be a different experience for a mature adult compared to a high school student who has never had long-term, full-time employment. Mature students have responsibilities stemming from previous life choices that also increase their concerns about "issues of identity, finances, gender, tradition, self worth, and loyalty" (Boulmetis, 1997, p. 13). Moreover, social status is customarily associated with financial rewards, that may be used to justify staying in boring, repetitive jobs indefinitely. Although the mature student's prospects for advancement are relatively good, beginning again in an entry-level position requires forming a fresh work identity and seeking acceptance within a new community of practice.

In general, this need to adjust to a new work situation makes the transition from college-based training to employment a significant change. Longitudinal research by Mackenzie-Davey and Arnold (2000) documented the experiences of change noted by

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<sup>10</sup> Like many other new graduates, I have experienced the initial frustration of feeling under-utilized in an entry-level position for which I had received more extensive training.

graduates during the first three years of work in a new career. "For most graduates starting work, fitting in could be a matter of learning how to behave rather than personal change" (Mackenzie-Davey & Arnold, 2000, 479). Their data include interviews with nine recent female graduates, most of whom explain their experiences of adjusting to the work environment as a form of self-discovery, "although a substantial minority describe themselves as disillusioned" (Mackenzie-Davey & Arnold, 2000, 480).

Disillusionment may be a result of conflicts between a new employee's expectations and the actual circumstances of employment.<sup>11</sup> One might assume that giving students information about the daily transactions and interactions they might have in the workplace will contribute to their successful career entry, particularly in cases where they have had little contact with working technicians in the field. Information about conditions and prospects in the career area should encourage learners to anticipate and prepare for the transition, maintain a positive attitude through the duration, and consequently, experience less distress as they adapt to change (Quinlan & O'Brodovich, 1996).

### ***Identity within a community of practice***

In his book, Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity, Wenger (1998) reasons that gaining acknowledgement of one's qualifications within a particular community of practice involves gaining recognition for identifiable characteristics shared by those in the group. Furthermore, acceptance as a group member is based on formal and informal evaluations of the individual's competencies in various required roles. "...membership in a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence"(Wenger, 1998, p. 153). In the context of a community of practice, identity takes shape as the individual pursues related activities in the local environment and through connections made elsewhere as a representative of the group. Development of this identity is also a learning process that includes engaging in practices that will enhance competencies valued by the group.

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<sup>11</sup> From my own experience with electrical design and my discussions with others who have changed career paths, disillusionment seems to be common among graduates who emerge from training and discover they are unhappy with previously-unanticipated aspects of their new career.

Identity in this study is defined as a product of an individual's appearance and behaviour in specific contexts and the meaning these things have for those concerned. Because individuals tend to adjust their behaviour to different situations, identity is multi-faceted and dynamic, with individuals identified by personal qualities that emerge during routine and not-so-routine activities and interactions.<sup>12</sup> My definition of identity is consistent with that of Lave & Wenger (1991) who focused on identity as socially constructed and shaped by the interactions between the individual and the community of practice for which that identity has meaning. "Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities" (Wenger, 1998, 145). With work-related activities often taking up the greater portion of a day, significant aspects of an individual's identity would be demonstrated through interactions associated with work-related communities of practice.

The importance of identification with the target community of practice is a central theme of Wenger's writing (1998). He emphasizes that "...issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging...and only secondarily in terms of skills and information"(Wenger, 1998, p. 263). This concept sounds like a rejection of the apparent skill-based focus of many training programs. However, it could be argued that an individual's view of identity and group belonging undoubtedly affect his/her attitude to a particular job and all the work-related interactions that influence successful participation in a community of practice.

According to Wenger's model, an individual's participation in the targeted career area advances the development of an identity within that particular context of working relationships and experiences. Any new workplace offers a new community of practice and a different context for work. Even when membership in a community of practice appears to be established, participants' identities continue to change as their contributions are assessed by themselves and others in various circumstances over

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<sup>12</sup> People's relative social status and their interpretation of past interactions also contribute to any specific context provided by time and place.

time.<sup>13</sup> In the extreme, the adjustments required of the individual will be more pervasive when the need to develop a workplace identity involves adopting a whole new career.

It seems evident that the importance of workplace communication should be more tangible to learners when they become aware of commonly-held attitudes within their chosen field. The development of a work-related identity is something that is likely to be enhanced by exposure to the views and shared experiences of experts in the occupational area. "...identity involves choosing what to know and becoming a person for whom such knowledge is meaningful."(Wenger, 1998, p. 273) In perceiving oneself as similar to established members of the target group, learning the required skills and information should also become more personally relevant. What then are the criteria for membership in a particular community of practice?

### ***Identity in membership: Engagement, imagination, and alignment***

According to Wenger (1998), membership in a community of practice is described by three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement with a community of practice involves participation in its practices. Building competence in the activities that define membership requires a commitment to the practices that are considered meaningful indicators of group membership. Commitment to the community of practice is made evident by the individual's involvement in developing relationships and maintaining standards that hold meaning for the group. With recognition as a group member, the individual gains access to new opportunities for building expertise. However, the value of any individual's actions is always subject to negotiation, requiring continual interaction with other members of the community of practice. Sharing experiences and establishing relationships among peers can be viewed as ways of negotiating meaning and indicating individual engagement with group tasks.

The second mode of belonging that Wenger describes is imagination. To construct an identity within a community of practice, individuals need to imagine themselves in different contexts, explore possible scenarios, and evaluate their behaviour as members

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<sup>13</sup> Evidence of how changing relations influence one's identity within a community of practice would need to be documented over time and compared to the person's work identity as described by the individual and others in the group.

of the group. One must visualize the network of relationships among various communities of practice and apply an understanding of past and current trends to predict the potential for change. Wenger (1998) elaborates further by writing, "The combination of engagement and imagination results in a *reflective* practice" (p. 217). To develop greater competence, the individual must be able to consider alternatives and evaluate results as well as actively practice.

Wenger's third mode of belonging is alignment. This aspect of identity connects the individual to activities and concerns outside of the workplace community of practice. Wenger describes alignment as quite separate from either imagination or engagement, calling for association with other communities of practice that may sometimes involve structures of power or influence. One might speculate that an awareness of these broader structures and interests may encourage individuals to see connections between their efforts and those of other communities of practice.

These three modes of belonging frame the instructional designs Wenger advocates. By creating situations that involve learners in engagement, imagination, and alignment as prospective members or even peripheral participants in the community of practice, the learning process theoretically becomes "a kind that engages one's identity on a meaningful trajectory and affords some ownership of meaning"(Wenger, 1998, p. 270). Learners experiencing this kind of ownership should be able to negotiate meanings while sharing different perspectives and values among their peers. These negotiating skills transfer to workplace situations where shared meanings continually define and redefine the community of practice. Moreover, developing an identity within the workplace and community of practice involves negotiating new meanings and revisiting established ones.

### ***Locating identity in discourse***

When the transition from college training to work is understood to involve gaining acceptance within a very different community of practice, the importance of communication and language learning cannot be underestimated. Various theories have linked learning and mental development with the ability to use language as a cultural

tool<sup>14</sup>. If language use is recognized as mediating social action in private thoughts and public exchanges, the analysis of discourse should provide information about how negotiations of meaning and identity are conducted.

Beginning with Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, researchers have proposed that learning is a process of acquiring cultural tools. Moreover, it is greatly facilitated by interactions with knowledgeable peers and experts. The situated learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) expands on Vygotskian sociocultural theory, emphasizing social practice as the dynamic mechanism that constitutes learning through experience. Discursive psychology, a discipline based on the interpretation of discourse, also draws on Vygotskian theories of language as contributing to the development of thought processes and identity (Harré, 1998). Accordingly, discourse may be rehearsed through the use of private speech, as proposed by Vygotsky. However, discursive psychologists stress the importance of discourse as social action used to negotiate and renegotiate social relations. They do not speculate on abstract attributes of the individual's thought processes to create a model of identity. As Rom Harré (1998) wrote, "My social identity just *is* the things I am inclined to say and do" (p. 133).

Harré's denial of the existence of an 'inner being' that the individual must strive to realize is consistent with Wenger's emphasis on the construction of meaning and identity within communities of practice. Discourse is a socio-cultural tool for producing meanings, independently in private thought and collaboratively within communities of practice. Language and negotiated discourse are employed to attribute personal qualities to oneself and others. Descriptions like 'friendly,' 'resourceful,' or 'studious' identify individuals, based on discursive interpretations of their behaviour.

"Psychological phenomena are attributes of the flow of action, not of the person who created or produced that flow. Persons have no inner *psychological* complexity." (Harré, 1998, p. 136)

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<sup>14</sup> James V. Wertsch (1991) identifies Vygotsky and Bakhtin among others as theorists contributing to our understanding of the connections between language use and culture.

Unlike cognitive psychology, discursive psychology does not acknowledge the existence of abstractions such as individual tendencies, aptitudes or dispositions except as these ideas are employed in discourse to effect particular social actions. Consequently, abstract concepts like 'motivation,' 'empathy,' and 'self-regulation' only exist in discourse, not as measurable phenomena. In other words, these ideas emerge as culturally-specific tools – only words used to justify or explain social behaviour.

Within this framework, subjectivity and the existence of self are also treated as products of discourse, rather than features of a person's psyche. To demonstrate this approach, consider the concept of subjectivity as it relates to identity and the self. Harré (1998) defines subjectivity in terms of three different references to the self that are produced in discourse.

#### Harré's concept of 'self'

Self 1	"I/me" used to locate me
Self 2	referring to my view of myself
Self 3	evident in social interactions

The first reference to self (Self 1) emerges in the use of pronouns to indicate one's existence. The beliefs about oneself described in discourse constitute the second discursive indicator of subjectivity (Self 2). Finally, the self (Self 3) is expressed through real and imagined social interactions. "Selves are grammatical fictions, necessary characteristics of person-oriented discourses" (Harré, 1998, p. 4).

Discursive references to subjectivity offer information about how individuals position and identify themselves. "The positionings we take up in a discursive context lead to certain ways of construing what happens to someone and predispose them to certain reactions and attitudes to those significations" (Harré & Gillett, 1994, p. 126). Reporting one's perceptions involves locating oneself in a context (Self 1). Perceptions that locate subjectivity generate concerns about intent. The attribution of specific intentions affects both one's self image (Self 2) and one's social exchanges (Self 3). Assigning intent to differences in perception is further complicated by measures of normativity with respect to other behaviours or interpretations. The relative propriety or impropriety of social

action is evaluated through discourse. Shared definitions of what constitutes normal behaviour influences our subjectivity and choices surrounding identity. These theorists emphasize the importance of equating non-linguistic signs with linguistic features of discourse under analysis. They describe 'episodes' of social interaction structured by a variety of discursive actions.

### ***Producing identity through discursive action***

As with many other disciplines, discursive psychologists may investigate different aspects of phenomena and develop their own protocol for their work. Rom Harré and Derek Edwards are prolific scholars who have both contributed to the development of discursive psychology, but each has adopted a different focus.<sup>15</sup> My study of student responses to recorded interviews draws inspiration from both approaches.

Edwards and Potter published Discursive Psychology in 1993, describing their investigation of "...how ...versions are *constructed in an occasioned manner to accomplish social actions. (authors' italics)* ...bringing together the usually disparate topics of memory (event representation) and attribution (causal explanations)" (p. 8). To describe the focus of their research, they created the Discursive Action Model (DAM) comprised of three sections:

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<sup>15</sup> In his 1997 book, Discourse and Cognition, Edwards refers to criticism from Harré and goes to some trouble to discredit Harré's approach to discursive psychology. Edwards outlines Harré's *ethogenics*, a term Harré coined in 1972 based on the premise that people are primarily concerned with rule-following, and the analyst's task was to examine discourse to extract the underlying rules. Edwards contrasts Harré's approach with his own use of ethnomethodology: "The ethogenic psychologist's goal is to provide his/her own explanation of social behavior, based on people's accounts; it is not to investigate account production of social activity – that is what ethnomethodology and conversation analysts do, and in doing so provide, in my view, a sounder basis for discursive psychology" (Edwards, 1997, pp. 79-80).

Edwards elaborates on this theme by again decrying what he construes as the analyst's imposition of contextual descriptors as a means of understanding discourse:

"...the nature of situations and their constraints can be analyzed... not by *adding in* the analyst's notions of social structure (or 'context') as a means of explaining talk, but by examining how participants, in their talk, make such settings and organizations relevant for their current activities." (Edwards, 1997, p. 85)

Harré's book, The Singular Self, was published a year after Edwards' argument and made no mention of their conflicting views. These disputes about analytical approach and methodology detract from the valuable insights both parties have to offer in the development of discursive psychology.



- Action,
- Fact and Interest,
- Accountability.

Action is exemplified by 'reportings' or discourse of a descriptive nature that may be used to infer other meanings while "situated in activity sequences such as those involving invitation refusals, blamings and defences" (p. 154). Fact and Interest covers how particular interests are often managed through discursive presentations of reports as fact. Furthermore, by promoting a particular report as factual, the acceptance of alternative reports is undermined. Accountability and agency emerge in 'reportings' both as the topic of the report and the concern of the reporter. The responsibility of the 'reporter' is invoked through reports of accountability. So, the discursive action of accounting for behaviours or events directly or indirectly includes this relationship between the initiator of the report and the report itself. Edwards and Potter emphasize their focus is the actions that occur through discourse. By examining reports in the context of discursive sequences, they provide insights into the functions performed and the meanings inferred through discourse.

Edwards (1997) describes meanings "...as features of social interaction, rather than speakers' intentions, (so) what any utterance 'means' is the same thing as its interactional uptake and trajectory" (p. 101). The most fundamental concept Edwards proposes is that of 'pragmatic intersubjectivity'. This term is applied to how and when participants establish shared knowledge in their discourse. Although participants may share other knowledge, that which emerges as shared during discursive exchanges will be of greatest importance at the time. Sequencing of the information exchange influences the 'intersubjective' aspect of the discourse and the recognition of shared knowledge.

'Who says what first' holds substantial importance. Edwards (1997) described the advantage of being the first to contribute to a topic: "...the one who provides the just-so, unobjected-to version of events, the one whose version stands as the criterion against which considering alternatives has to look like nit-picking" (p. 223). However, within the sequence, a version may be adjusted or 'repaired' to better gain acceptance, while other versions may be undermined to establish recognition of a preferred version.

Questioning the 'objectivity' of versions may weaken them; for just as personal experience can be used to support credibility, so also it can isolate the individual's version of events as 'subjective'. Intentions may become the topic of discussion, but more often intent is inferred in these strategic actions taken during discourse.

Consensus or agreement validates a report or version. When a version is presented, but not taken up for discussion, it may imply that it is already commonly-accepted, and discussion is not needed. Edwards (1997) also sees consensus in "successive speakers completing each other's talk ...(and)...talking in unison" (p. 131). Naturally, these forms of discourse may suggest more than just consensus in conversations among students with English as an additional language as they use various strategies to improve their fluency and accuracy.

### ***Identity and language skills***

As Edwards and Potter (1993) point out, language is the primary cultural tool used in social interactions. Harré and Gillett (1994) also consider "what resources people have to accomplish their plans, projects, and intentions" and how they "are put to work in coordinated actions" (p. 98). The resources referred to include the language and concepts that individuals are able to use effectively in their discourse. These resources are evident in people's selection of vocabulary, syntax, register, and grammar, and cause others to infer one's educational background and access to opportunities circumscribed by ethno-cultural community and socio-economic status. Harré and Gillett direct their study of how resources are applied in discourse toward the production of psychological phenomena, the demonstration of self, and the construction of identity.

If English is considered a resource, language proficiency clearly limits language learners as they interact with others and present themselves in various, new contexts (Norton, 2000). Access to diverse social groups depends on our facility with the language relevant to those communities of practice because acceptance involves communicating effectively. It follows that the value individuals place on language as a resource is best demonstrated by their active engagement with activities that improve their language skills. Norton (2000) described this apparent investment of effort as "an investment in a

learner's own identity , an identity that is constantly changing across time and space"(p.11).

As a language teacher, I am anxious to provide materials that will be viewed by students as relevant to their lives and aspirations. If I am able to identify how students view themselves as learners, what goals they have, and how much effort they are prepared to invest in language acquisition, I think there is some likelihood of engaging them in tasks that they would find productive. It seems self-evident that learners who do not see themselves as needing to achieve specific language goals are not likely to invest time and energy in self-improvement. Consequently, my initial objective with the appliance servicing students was to provide accurate information that would engage them in learning about the kinds of communication called for in the field. I hoped that by exposing them to the expectations of professionals in the workplace, they would see reasons to invest in improving their English.

In the context of *Learning about an occupation*, the recorded interviews with appliance-servicing technicians were also intended to expose student listeners to the work-related identities presented by the speakers. The interview subjects would provide the language used to describe their personal qualifications, perspectives, and experiences. Then, the group response activity was designed to give students the chance to interpret and evaluate the significance of the interview contents. In the end, the discursive strategies and negotiations the participants used, would help me to identify not only the ideas valued by the students, but their investment in English language learning as part of becoming successful appliance service technicians.

## **Summary**

Making a smooth transition from college training to the workplace involves developing a work-related identity appropriate to one's occupational objectives. This new identity continually evolves within the workplace community of practice as individuals participate in a range of interactions, most involving communication. Acceptance and recognition within a community of practice is related to how other members perceive the individual's contribution to shared objectives. Wenger describes three modes of belonging to a community of practice: engagement, imagination, and alignment.

Discursive psychology offers a means of understanding how individuals describe themselves in particular ways and indicate their affiliations through discourse. To analyze discursive activities, Harré's three-part concept of subjectivity describes how individuals position themselves with respect to others and how they construct identity within a particular context. Harré and Gillett also refer to the ways in which people's discursive resources define their communications. The versions, shared knowledge, and consensus along with the model of action, fact and interest, and accountability proposed by Edwards and Potter provide a means of examining the ways in which discourse is constructed. In order to interpret the interview responses, it would be necessary to examine the student discussions as social actions shaped by verbal exchanges at the time. As in any conversation, each speaker's contribution would be made up of various discursive acts that propose, sustain, or block the emergence of various ideas. These discursive acts could provide information about the individuals in each group, not only how they negotiated an identity for themselves in a specific group context, but how they contributed to the group interpretations of the recorded interviews. Understanding the significance students gave the recorded interviews would require this kind of detailed examination of the group responses.

I hoped that if learners recognized weaknesses in their language skills, they would also see reasons to improve their English proficiency. Language learning means acquiring resources that provide various forms of social access. As Norton explains, a learner's investment in language skills contributes to her ability to present herself effectively in different situations – deploying language resources to develop an identity in various contexts. As well as outlining the information students considered important, the group responses should offer clues about how students identified themselves and what discursive resources they were able to utilize at the time of the recording.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### *Introduction*

“Developing a methodology for certain types of qualitative research is an ongoing process. The nature of the problem to be investigated is fluid, incompletely determined at the beginning of the study, and subject to change as the study progresses” (Seibold, 2000, 147).

I began my research as a means to learn more about appliance servicing, and in doing so, produce instructional aids for my ESL students. However, the focus of my study changed as questions emerged during the data collection and analysis. Listening to the interviews, I decided it was likely there would be differences between the content I considered important and the ideas my students would find significant. Even among native speakers, “any extended discourse will be experienced differently by different listeners...” (Brown, 1977/1990, 9).

in this case, differences would stem from various factors. To begin with, my class would inevitably respond to the recordings as technician-trainees attending college, each with his own individual perspective at the time. Then, as a non-native English speaker, each student’s understanding of the interviews would initially depend on his listening skills and knowledge of English vocabulary. Even with repeated listening, the task of following fast-paced, unfamiliar voices on the audiotapes might pose a challenge and undoubtedly affect the content noted by language students. The individuals’ language resources and perceptions of personal position affected how they accessed the interviews. Consequently, the student evaluations of the important ideas in the recordings seemed to be the best source of information about the educational worth of the unedited interviews.<sup>16</sup>

But what exactly constitutes educational worth? Clearly, the educational value of an instructional aid should be the extent to which it supports learning. Then, to determine

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<sup>16</sup> The only editing that took place was the insertion of silence where names of companies or individuals would have affected anonymity.

the merits of the audiotapes for this particular combined-skills program involves noting how the recorded interviews engaged student interest, prompted language production, and promoted the goals of their training in appliance servicing. I suggest evidence of these features may be found by examining :

- how my observations and those of the student groups compared;
- how students described the important ideas in each interview;
- how individuals positioned themselves in the group discussions.

The students' participation in the response task indicated more about their assessment of the interview contents and their own group discussion than a direct survey could have revealed. Ideas from the interviews became important, not only because they were mentioned in response discussions, but because of the ways in which they were received by group members. For these reasons, my study became directed toward understanding the students' responses as a source of information about the merits of the interviews.

*Learning about an occupation* began as a research study to discover the communication, practices and personal qualities valued in the appliance servicing field and evolved into an evaluation of an instructional aid - an evaluation based on students' responses. To explain how this change in emphasis developed, it is necessary to recount each part of the process in more detail.

### ***Part #1: Interviewing appliance service professionals***

The research for this project began as a pilot project called *Language proficiency requirements for appliance service technicians*. The initial objective was 'a brief qualitative study to establish the language proficiency expectations facing appliance service technicians who are non-native speakers,...more explicit insights with respect to the actual working conditions and consequently, the language demands...(and)..a better understanding of the skills required to communicate in the workplace.' My interest was in learning more about the appliance servicing field, especially the value that experienced technicians give to English communication skills. I expected that my students would find the taped interviews engaging and the language task clearly relevant to their training objectives.

Five interviews were conducted as part of the pilot project.<sup>17</sup> On completion, I had not only learned about the variety of jobs available to appliance service technicians, but I had been told good communication skills are a necessity for customer service.<sup>18</sup> However, it was also implied that inexperienced technicians would be lucky to get work in the back of a repair shop, with low wages and little, if any, access to customers.<sup>19</sup> With research for the pilot project concluded, I still had questions about the perspectives of technicians with other immigrant experiences, technicians with their own companies, and female technicians. I also observed that interviews with technicians could not simulate the conversations that might normally occur at work because our discussion not only touched on a range of topics that would not necessarily emerge in the field, but took place outside of the usual workplace contexts of employer/employee, appliance-service technician/customer, or co-worker relations.

As a result, I began the project, *Learning about an occupation*, by recording conversations with three more technicians in work situations, bringing the interview total to eight. I had initially hoped to record small groups sharing their customer-service experiences and discussing appliance troubleshooting. However, most of the technicians I encountered were unavailable for small discussion groups. In some cases, technicians who had initially agreed to be interviewed found it difficult to commit to a time because of the 'on-call' nature of their work.

Consequently, eight individual interviews were recorded as a sampling of the perspectives of appliance service professionals, but no discussions among technicians took place. The idea of having technicians talk among themselves had been prompted by the search for 'authentic' language. Authentic language would provide the vocabulary and style of speaking used for specific functions or situations on the job (Richards, 2001). Although giving interviews is not part of the technician's regular job description, it is also doubtful whether any organized gathering could accurately reproduce their daily exchanges. Moreover, awareness of the recording process is bound to have some effect on any speaker's delivery. With these factors in mind, I realized it would be almost

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<sup>17</sup> The sequence of recordings was T.L., MOE, S.R.N., ILIA, and J.S.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to the interview with T.L.

<sup>19</sup> Refer to the interview with S.R.N.

impossible for me to collect 'authentic,' situated discourse between technicians working in the appliance servicing field.

### **Selecting participants**

Accepting that most people rarely get formally interviewed about their work,<sup>20</sup> it is no surprise that the set of recordings with appliance personnel could not be expected to represent common conversations. Rather than attempting to reproduce 'authentic' exchanges in the workplace, I wanted to use the interviews as a means of gathering information about the trade. Consequently, as a researcher and educator, it was important to me that the interview subjects represented a variety of perspectives, acceptable to their peers in the appliance servicing field. For this reason, I looked for recommendations from others with connections in the trade.

I received some excellent referrals from the Kwantlen University College instructors in Appliance Servicing, Gurpreet (Gary) Arneja and Ken Freeborn, but for individual, small business owner/operators, availability was a major barrier to participation.<sup>21</sup> Three of the interviews took place after technicians were directly encouraged by their employers or managers to participate, and space for the interview in the workplace was made available.

Although some of the technicians interviewed speak English with an accent, I encountered other non-native English speakers who seemed reticent among their peers, and unfortunately, they were unwilling to be interviewed. Their experiences in the workplace would probably have made a valuable contribution to this project. Finally, the absence of female technicians in these interviews is noteworthy. Although one woman who graduated from the Appliance Servicing program was identified, she had since been laid off, changed her work, and through an intermediary, indicated no interest in participating. In spite of these conditions, the interviews together with the student responses point to issues that may have been concerns for those unavailable to participate.

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<sup>20</sup> Job interviews with prospective employers are possibly the most common context for work-related interviews.

<sup>21</sup> M.B. was an exception to this, because his business is not based on service calls.



The eight technicians who were interviewed do have somewhat different viewpoints. Their varied experiences in the servicing field ranged from five to more than thirty years. Three are first-generation immigrants from different language backgrounds and language proficiencies characteristic of non-native English speakers, successfully established in the field.

### **Recording the interviews**

Audio recordings were chosen to help preserve the anonymity of the speakers, making participants less self-conscious than they might have been on video. Although the taped interviews could not provide the same kind of communicative exchanges students would experience in the specific work situations, the recorded voices were intended to expose students to various styles and pacing in the speech of appliance experts. Technicians do not usually spend much time sharing their observations and experiences during working hours. However, some similarities undoubtedly exist between the styles of speech the subjects used in the interviews and the styles of speech they would apply to various situations on and off the job site.<sup>22</sup> As a listening comprehension exercise, this set of recordings offers an indication of the fluency and accuracy of speakers whom new trainees might encounter.

Instead of using a formal list of questions, I initiated conversation on the work-related areas of interest I had outlined beforehand, and the interviews developed some spontaneity. This open-ended approach was intended to allow the interview subjects to focus on topics they considered of particular importance. The areas of interest, listed in my description of the project, were:

- ***Experiences on the job:*** incidents that involved learning something important or solving problems; the process of changing from a novice to a seasoned professional; the variety of tasks in an average work week; situations in which communication was important
- ***Professionalism:*** what defines a professional appliance service technician; aspects of language or communication that contribute to professionalism; what

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<sup>22</sup> Brown (1977/1990) refers to styles of speech as “an infinite number... (with) no definable boundaries” (5).

defines the best kind of co-worker; what defines the best type of employee/employer; opportunities for advancement and what is required

- **Communication skills:** required reading skills in English; required writing skills in English; speaking and listening skills in English; the most important communication skills for customer service

I tended to begin each interview by establishing the speaker's background and credentials. From there, I tried to help the interview subject by asking pertinent questions, getting clarification when necessary, and inviting the speaker to talk about the topics of interest. Most interviews were twenty to thirty minutes long, but one extended to over an hour.

## ***Part #2: Transcribing and analysing the interviews***

"...the choice of a transcription system, or any other way of presenting text and talk, inevitably reflects the analyst's theoretical position..."

(Edwards & Potter, 1993, p. 179)

Deciding on a transcription style can be a challenging process, and each of the interviews with technicians had to be transcribed, so the speakers could review the content and make corrections or request editing.<sup>23</sup> Taking note of every element of spontaneous spoken exchanges is virtually impossible for the same reasons written accounts must differ from visual images. Written documentation calls for a different kind of collaboration from the reader. The analyst's choice of transcription style draws attention to specific elements of the discourse, but not every feature that may affect our perceptions of meaning. At the same time, the transcript as a document carries an expectation of accuracy, associated with its socio-historical purposes as legal record.

In transcribing the eight interviews with appliance personnel, it was necessary to thoroughly consider the purpose of the documentation. I decided I wanted the transcripts to be easy to read, without attempting to accurately represent pronunciation or hesitations specific to each speaker. Instead, I tried to note the words or syllables spoken and any pauses that drew my attention as a listener. These transcripts were not intended to emphasize language errors. The ideas emerging in the interviews and how

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<sup>23</sup> No one requested editing of the recorded interview.

they related to the themes of my inquiry were most important. The main purpose of the interview transcripts was to document the conversation so the technicians' views and concerns could be identified in text form for the purposes of my study.

For the pilot project, my analysis of the interviews was based on categorizing significant themes. However, this project is focused on the responses students had to the recordings and how their responses point to the educational value of the interviews in prompting student discussion.

### ***Part #3: Using the interview tapes with language students***

#### **A listening task**

Listening to audio-taped speech is a well-established practice in the language training classroom (Brown, 1977/1990, Ur, 1984/2000). The audio medium offers several potential benefits for learners, while maintaining some anonymity for the speakers. By listening to the recordings, students might be expected to become more familiar with the manner of speaking and the range of perspectives common among technicians and service managers. Although many of the concerns covered in the interviews may never be explicitly discussed in the field, the perspectives exist as 'tacit' information in the workplace, "underlying assumptions...which may never be articulated" (Hung & Nichani, 2002, 182). Audio recordings require students to "focus on the actual sounds" made by the speaker instead of relying on visual cues, "giving more concentrated aural practice"(Ur, 1984/2000, 25). The tape medium also allows for review of the spoken words, so students can check their aural comprehension.

Seven of the eight audio interviews were presented to my class of appliance-service technician-trainees with English as an additional language.<sup>24</sup> The students were asked to share their observations about the recorded interviews by participating in tapings of small group discussions as one of the activities in their English class. Their task was to record the important information contained in each interview.

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<sup>24</sup> The interview with S.R.N. was not shared with students because of concerns it might distress them. On reviewing the transcript, S.R.N. himself commented on the depressing nature of what he had described.

## **A response task**

The student responses were typically conversations that involved some cooperation among group members. Listening within the context of a group discussion requires not only comprehending others, but preparing something appropriate to say, and using various strategies to contribute to the conversation (Ur, 1984/2000). Focused group discussion is recognized in language training as a good way for students to develop greater fluency, while gaining experience “participating constructively” in the exchange of ideas (Ur, 1981/2002, 3). The task of identifying the important points raised in the interview is a relatively open-ended objective when students understand it involves some evaluation, not necessarily a list of every topic mentioned. Open-ended tasks are recommended for eliciting interaction because they offer students both a challenge and “ensured success” (Ur, 1981/2001, 15).

The small group response tasks not only offered opportunities for every student to participate, but in as much they provided a situation for unsupervised discourse about topics of shared interest, the conversation tasks paralleled “engagement in actual practice and the forms of competence inherent in it” (Wenger, 1998, p. 265). To the extent the task could be student-centred and controlled, group members should experience a more ‘authentic’ conversation with all the challenges of managing exchanges among the participants, practising strategies to communicate their ideas effectively while developing overall fluency in English. In theory, without the teacher present, the relatively unregulated peer interaction encourages students to share freely their interpretations of the interviews, bridging gaps in comprehension as those with better listening skills provide clarification for others. Moreover, questions about the interviews can be raised that might incite student curiosity beyond the confines of the task. By discussing important ideas in the interviews within the context of a group interaction, students are called on to negotiate the meanings and significance of the content among themselves.

## **Recording the student responses**

Having students record themselves speaking is also a recommended practice in language learning programs (Knowles, 1983). Recordings can be used to not only make students more aware of their speaking skills, but also to provide teachers with more

information about their students' strengths and weaknesses over time in conversation with various peers (Knowles, 1983).

The process of having students in unsupervised groups record their impressions was intended to encourage a greater level of spontaneity than might be possible with the presence of the instructor. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as "improvised practice", occurring when "opportunities for engagement" are provided (p. 93). Norton (2000) proposes giving learners control over "the rate of flow of information in a communicative event" as a means of building learner confidence (p. 123). Student control over both the listening process and the response tapings was expected to contribute to their confidence as learners. In most cases, the students recorded themselves without my presence or the presence of any other instructor to encourage freer expression without concerns about gaining immediate approval for their efforts. For the most part, group members decided when to start or stop recording.

There was no special credit offered or requested for participation in the listening task and recorded group discussions. Students signed releases at the end of their program with the understanding that their recorded ideas would contribute to the evaluation of the interview tapes as a learning tool in this vocational program. As with the interviewed technicians, initials have been used, so only people known to the speakers would be able to identify their voices.

#### ***Part #4: Transcribing and analysing the student responses***

Data analysis within the context of discursive psychology involves identifying the interests of participants by examining the topics of their discourse, how the topics emerge, how they are categorized by the participants themselves, and how they contribute to various interactions (Edwards, 1997).<sup>25</sup> Unlike Harré, Edwards (1997) promotes conversation analysis (C.A.) and the use of the transcription conventions first developed by Gail Jefferson. His rationale is that "CA is a *non-* cognitive approach to talk-in-interaction, in that it avoids attempting to explain talk in terms of the mental states that precede it, generate it, or result from it" (p. 85). He states that conversation analysis

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<sup>25</sup> Nothing Harré writes would appear to conflict with this focus on participants' concerns as evidenced in discursive action.

supports the study of discourse as sequenced action rather than communication or content. However, one questions the value of noting a 'micropause' or changes in speed that are obviously relative and subject to the perceptions of the transcriber. Consequently, I have not attempted to produce such detailed accuracy as C.A. would require. Instead, an audio version of the original tapes will be available for readers to access.

My interpretation of the data is based on examining the student responses not only for their explicit evaluations of the interview content; but also for any evidence of personal investment in becoming an appliance service technician. In addition, the students' proficiencies with English conversation must be considered as evidence of the resources individuals brought to their discussions. The use of these language resources contributes to the value of the activity for 'improvised practice'.

## ***Part #5: Evaluating the interview tapes***

### **Comparing the importance given specific topics**

To begin with, the interview themes described by the students needed to be compared to the topics I had identified in each interview. If the topics we noted as important didn't match, it could indicate differences in our perspectives. The group responses also involved negotiated conclusions, in that the topics were introduced and defined by members of each discussion group using various discursive actions to present their views. Therefore, I had to take into consideration that the significance each topic had for the students was reflected in how that importance was expressed, how shared knowledge was established, and how group consensus was confirmed at that time.

### **How language resources were used to establish topic importance**

By examining the discursive strategies students used, the topics they neglected, and the problems with language production individuals demonstrated, the students' resources with respect to English can be considered as factors in the establishment of topic value. The ways in which students managed their discussions provide evidence of negotiation skills individuals had at the time. The themes students overlooked in the interviews sometimes point to gaps in listening comprehension. Language errors that students

failed to correct indicate problems with accuracy in production, reflecting gaps in English training and/or the investment students made in self-correction.

### **How individuals positioned themselves and others in discussion**

Indicators of subjectivity that positioned the students with respect to the interview content provide evidence of how they identified with the service technicians on the audiotapes. Use of personal pronouns, self-referential remarks, and descriptions of one's social behaviour as perceived by others contributed to the production of identity. These references provide some clues about the kind of investment individuals had in becoming appliance service technicians at the time of the response recordings.

### ***Conclusion***

This approach to the data should provide information not only about how the recorded interviews with technicians were evaluated by the students, but what kinds of discursive resources students had access to at the time, and how the students viewed themselves with respect to appliance servicing. By analysing the student discourse in this way, conclusions can be drawn about the value of the interview tapes for engaging these students in a fluency-building task that is based on listening to those employed in the field describing the work and communication related to the job.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA

### *Introduction*

Seven of the eight interviews<sup>26</sup> were presented to the students in my English as an Additional Language class over a six-month period during the second half of the year-long, Appliance-Servicing, combined-skills program. My decisions about the sequence of the listening/response tasks and their timing in the program were guided by the interview content, the organization of the Appliance Servicing program, and the order in which the interviews were recorded.

Differences in the listening experience and response task occurred as students became familiar with the process, student attendance fluctuated, and note-taking was left up to the individual student. Although this is only one series of specific conversations among classmates in Appliance Servicing (EAL), this collection of student responses provides some helpful information about the educational use of these recorded interviews. To assess the instructional value of the interviews, I examined three features of the response data: the topics identified by students, the language resources students demonstrated, and the positions students took to identify themselves in relation to others. I also became aware of ways in which the structure of the task seemed to influence discussion.

### *Topics identified by students*

Each interview prompted different reactions from the students, although other factors, such as their progress in the technical training, must have influenced students' attitudes, too. In general, the topics that emerged after each interview usually matched the ones I

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<sup>26</sup> The missing interview was with S.R.N., an Appliance Servicing student who told me he had graduated at the top of his class, yet had not been able to find an entry-level position in appliance servicing for two years. I do not know if there were no jobs to be had at the time S.R.N. graduated, or he was ill-equipped to find a job. His good course marks were not enough to get him an entry-level job in the field for two years.



had identified. What was distinctive about the subject matter covered in each of the sixteen separate responses were the instances where students spent considerable time on a specific idea, missed a topic completely, or launched into other related subjects of interest.

### **Topics from the interview with Moe (July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000)**

Although not every response included every topic, students discussed the challenge of solving unusual appliance problems, the difficulties of running a business, and the advantages of working for a larger company. Different groups also recalled Moe's views on the problem of identifying symptoms when a customer does not speak English fluently, the extensive hands-on experience offered by the apprenticeship-training program in Alberta, and the value of knowledge over physical strength when moving appliances.

G.: So - uh... also he talked about -uh – uh – safety -in moving the appliances –

H.: Hm hm.

G.: - don't damage it – and don't hurt yourself.

H.: Yeah. (word?) he says that age is not problem –Age is no problem.

And –uh- the more physical problem –

J.: You need to know how to move -<sup>27</sup>

These topics matched the main ideas I had identified in Moe's interview.

### **Topics from the interview with T.L. (July 17, 2000)**

A lack of job openings for service technicians in T.L.'s company and the need for one or two years shop experience were topics discussed by the students. They also noted T.L. saying that incomes in the appliance servicing field haven't kept up with inflation. Students expressed agreement with T.L.'s claim that communication was important on the job. Calming down customers and knowing how to explain things were recalled by students as necessary skills, but one group of students mistakenly referred to a "code" used by service technicians as a means of keeping information from customers and avoiding technical terms.

J.: Sometime customers ask... you for...uh...the problem ...  
of the machine – of the appliance.

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<sup>27</sup> Moe Interview Group 3 Response, lines 115 to 126

You don't have to explain techni- technical -the way y –  
 you don't have to explain the way technical...  
 but you can explain...  
 D.: By the code.  
 J.: Yeah.  
 D.: Company will understand, but customers...  
 (pause)  
 T.:...won't.<sup>28</sup>

The coding mentioned by T.L. was part of invoicing, not a way of keeping information from the customer.<sup>29</sup>

Students commented more on the poor job prospects than the importance of language skills. Without the likelihood of a job, communication skills seemed relatively unimportant. In addition, nobody mentioned age as a factor that affected T.L.'s hiring, although T.L. talked about the physical demands of the job and potential openings for younger technicians. This employer did not seem to consider the transferable skills of mature students as assets. Finally, no one referred to T.L.'s mention of bias against non-native speakers. Students may not have recognized the meaning of the word, and T.L. never elaborated on past complaints which may have defined such bias more clearly.

### **Topics from the interview with Ilia (August 8, 2000)**

The students discussed what Ilia had said about keeping up with technological changes, the practice of changing boards and assemblies instead of fixing parts, and the effect of the Internet on the business. When the future of appliance servicing was discussed in one group, students decided that no technology would be able to replace their services.

T.: It's impossible to replace the technician.  
 G.: Yeah.  
 T.: Because a tech have to take –uh... notice.  
 G.: Yes.  
 T.: To diagnose a problem.<sup>30</sup>

Students also raised the importance of practice and experience to develop the necessary technical skills for a job with a company like Ilia's. English communication

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<sup>28</sup> T.L. Interview Group 2 Response, lines 166 to 180

<sup>29</sup> T.L. Interview, lines 259 to 276

<sup>30</sup> Ilia Interview Group 1 Response, lines 175 to 183

skills were acknowledged as important, but Ilia's acceptance of others' attempts in English made language seem less problematic.

J.: Like you said – that what he said.  
 If he don't – he doesn't understand –  
 Z.: He understands.  
 J.: - the first time you speak maybe –  
 the second time, he will understand, right?  
 S.: That's right. That's right.  
 J.: So that -  
 Z.: (words?)  
 S.: "Long as you understand," he said, "Fine."<sup>31</sup>

Students noted the importance Ilia gave technical experience over language skills. No one discussed how employees who did not have good language skills would only be able to work in the shop, cleaning up used appliances, replacing parts, and doing repairs. One group expressed a strong interest in learning more about Ilia's business. They talked about both working for Ilia and learning from him, comfortable around Ilia because he "knows where you come from."<sup>32</sup>

### **Topics from the interview with J.S. (September 20, 2000)**

The students initially focused on the position of subcontractor, in particular the payment, working arrangements, and prerequisite shop experience. English proficiency emerged as a concern, primarily when the technician could not understand the customer, although one student mentioned the importance of being understood; all agreed that clear English was a 'bonus.' No one mentioned the reports J.S. gave of technicians being rejected by customers who weren't able to understand their English.

A key subject in the response was how appliance service technicians might make money. One student repeatedly proposed having a fixed service rate for a job, rather than charging according to the time it took the technician, but there was no evidence of consensus on this issue. The student also shared information about the working conditions for an appliance service subcontractor he had met. He told the others that sometimes the technician only worked a few hours a day because he didn't have many calls.

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<sup>31</sup> Ilia Interview Group 2 Response, lines 636 to 649

<sup>32</sup> Ilia Interview Group 2 Response, lines 633 to 634

T.: But n- sometime you work one-quarter day.  
 Z.: That's right.  
 T.: Or two-quarter day. That's a guy in (company), eh?  
 (words?)  
 He work on call. He stay home.  
 H.: Oh...  
 T.: And when (company) got some call, they phone him and he go.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the practice of pushing parts while maintaining low service charges stimulated group discussion.

Two subjects that did not emerge in the student discussion were prejudice and the ethics of misrepresenting credentials. J.S. used the words 'prejudice' or 'prejudiced' eleven times during the interview. I was surprised that none of the students had raised the topic. When I asked the group members about it the following day, they said they did not know what the word meant. (At that time, a student who had been absent for the discussion contributed to my explanation.) The issue of credentials was only referred to once by J.S., so I was less surprised when it was not recalled by the students. In this case also, I presented the problem in the class, and the negative consequences were discussed.

### **Topics from the interview with R.S. (October 4, 2000)**

The low starting wage and R.S.'s advice about working in a shop for a couple of years before doing service calls were ideas which both groups discussed. However, one group debated the difficulties for new graduates with extensive financial responsibilities if they accept low wages until they've gained more experience.

V.: Otherwise, if you go out from the school ,  
 they won't - any company right you start  
 they don't give you the highest pay right away.  
 A.: Yeah.  
 V.: You are to start from the bottom.  
 A.: Yeah.  
 V.: For some of us, like me, we got a job, so it's very hard to go from –  
 like if you make good money and you want to go to the lowest pay – hard.<sup>34</sup>

The other group noted how these conditions had been reported in previous interviews and seemed more accepting of the additional shop experience because of R.S.'s

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<sup>33</sup> J.S. Interview Group Response 171 to 184

<sup>34</sup> R.S. Interview Group 1 Response, lines 190 to 203

assertion that good technicians are in demand and well rewarded. Both groups recalled R.S. emphasizing the need to be able to explain themselves as the most important aspect of their English proficiency.

### **Topics from the interview with Doug (October 11, 2000)**

Students expressed strong opinions about Doug's views on the years of experience to be qualified, the kind of company to work for, the value of rebuilding appliances. One student referred to the five-years experience Doug had said were needed before a technician could be considered qualified and argued that individual differences in ability should be considered. Another student introduced the idea of working for any company, preferably one offering a variety of appliances to repair, and following Doug's example of self-employment part-time. A third student suggested that working only for one brand, like Maytag, could provide opportunities to become involved with research and development.<sup>35</sup>

Personal appearance, care for the homeowner's property, and joking with the customer were also noted in discussion.

J.: But then, you (*word?*) the joke to your customer.  
 You might be still friendly and *-uh-*  
 V.: Yeah (*word?*)  
 T.: Say...*uh-*  
 J.: (*words?*)  
 T.: Say how you break it yesterday or something.  
 V.: Your jokes....  
 J.: Your joke...  
 T.: And did your – your husband ...uh – bust it. (laughter)<sup>36</sup>

However, neither group discussed the kind of language problems Doug's 'Oriental' trainee had with a customer who complained about his inability to communicate.

### **Topics from the interview with M.B. (December 12 & 13, 2000)**

Students initiated discussions about doing repairs for free, cultural differences regarding attitudes toward appointments, references to slavery conditions in other countries, and

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<sup>35</sup> The student, H., was an engineer in his country of origin.

<sup>36</sup> Doug Interview Group Response 1, lines 130 to 145

the use of service charges in Canada. Volunteering repair services elicited strong opinions for and against. Cultural differences were acknowledged as requiring flexibility with students sharing different attitudes from their countries of origin about appointments and how to handle different understandings related to time.

The argument about service charges in Canada could not be resolved. Relating the practices in his country of origin, one student explained:

H.:If you can fix it, I pay you money. You cannot fix it. I take it back.  
I don't pay you money."<sup>37</sup>

Anecdotal information offered by one student was questioned because of the other students' interpretation of current practice and the individual's language proficiency.

I elicited responses on most of the other topics that emerged because, unlike the previous listening activities, the task was completed on two consecutive days with the whole class together.

### ***Discursive resources students demonstrated in discussion***

The discursive resources that students used in their responses are considered over the six-month period as a whole, rather than chronologically or individually. In this study, students' language resources are only important as representing a possible range of strengths and weaknesses. The discussion framework offered students the benefit of sharing resources by allowing students to get clarification from classmates or identify questions common to the group. Students frequently contributed to each other's explanations. These signs of agreement and collaboration, such as the repetition and completion of each other's sentences, also seemed to be a means of practising vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax.

A few students were able to produce commonly-used phrases and expressions, but often demonstrated some inaccuracies. For example, one student seemed unaware of repeatedly using an ambiguous expression, 'expose yourself,' without an indirect object, which suggested an explanation of common usage and collocations could be helpful to

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<sup>37</sup> M.B. Interview Class Response 2, lines 418 to 421

the student.<sup>38</sup> A similar kind of problem occurred when none of the students was able to accurately offer the expression 'on-the-side' which had been stated twice during Doug's interview.<sup>39</sup>

When students contributed by adding to or repeating others' words, they seemed to be using the conversation more as a listening exercise than a speaking task. All the students were able to contribute, and they often encouraged each other by signalling their active listening with *hm hm*, *yes*, echoing the speaker's words, or ending others' sentences. One student used repetition and alternative phrasing to participate in the discussion primarily as an active listener.

At one point, a student used a common expression with an obscenity to describe an attitude toward repairing component parts: "Kill the whole motor and fuck the assembly."<sup>40</sup> This occurred again when a student described doing a "blow job" on a refrigerator and none of the other students seemed to be able to offer an alternative term to use with the general public.

G:....So I give – *uh* –the water was coming in the fridge.

I give the *blow job* to the – *um* –

J.: Blow job...

(*student laughter*)

G.: Yeah. Well, that's what it is.

(*student laughter*)

Brooke: *Ah* - no.

G.: But, that's - that's – that's the word we use.

(*student laughter*)

Brooke: Really?

T.: Really...

(*student laughter*)<sup>41</sup>

From the brief laughter, I surmised that most of the students knew there was another meaning.<sup>42</sup>

When an individual expressed something unexpected the other(s) usually tried to get clarification. However, on other occasions, individuals had vocabulary<sup>43</sup> and

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<sup>38</sup> M.B. Interview Class Response 1, lines 1121,1155,1318

<sup>39</sup> Doug Interview, lines 483, 505

<sup>40</sup> Ilia Interview Group 1 Response, line 160

<sup>41</sup> M.B. 956 974

<sup>42</sup> M.B. Interview Class Response 1, lines 956 to 974

grammatical inaccuracies, but their classmates rarely requested clarification. During one response, students met with two obvious vocabulary problems as one used 'calibrate' instead of 'evaluate' or 'assess'<sup>44</sup> and another searched for words without assistance from his listeners.<sup>45</sup> However, the first problem did not call for clarification, and the speaker dealt with the second problem by expressing the idea differently.

With students controlling the conversations, various communication strategies emerged. One student directed discussion toward identifying a company for the purposes of applying for a job. In another case, the direction of the conversation was often guided by one student inviting others to speak on specific points. A different instance involved a student using various strategies, such as offering parallels with his own situation, denying the importance of language skills, and referring to big businesses destroying small, to neutralise the negative feelings one interview had generated and encourage a classmate to feel more positive. However, in another response, a different student used personal information about contrasting financial situations to isolate and discredit the opinion of one person in the group.

Overall, the students effectively kept the conversation going and seemed to avoid strong disagreement by ending the recording. Most individuals demonstrated the ability to offer opinions and persuade others to agree. At one point, a less fluent student demonstrated the ability to explain an original idea he had about the different directions people might take from an entry-level job in appliance servicing. Different strategies were sometimes used to establish topic importance. In one group, a student introduced and emphasized topics by asking for opinions from others, then encouraged those with opinions compatible with his own. In another group, a student introduced topics he recalled from the interview, building consensus by inviting others to confirm what had been said.

When one student complained about his lack of comprehension and how it occurred in other classes, too, only one other student spoke up to agree the speaker had been too fast. When I suggested that the student should stop the class when he had a

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<sup>43</sup> J.S. Interview Group Response, lines, 270, 313

<sup>44</sup> R.S. Interview Group 1 Response, lines 66 to 74

<sup>45</sup> R.S. Interview Group 1 Response, lines 341 to 347



comprehension problem, he said he might be the only one needing help, so he would not interrupt the listening task.

H.: Well, maybe it's just only one that cannot follow, but – other guys can follow that.<sup>46</sup>

Listening comprehension difficulties and vocabulary limitations affected the students' abilities to notice two significant discussion topics - prejudice and misrepresentation of credentials. Lastly, there was no indication that students recognized the risks of teasing the customer, as one technician had recommended, if you don't have a good command of the language and delivery.

### ***How students positioned themselves***

The students identified themselves in various ways during the group responses. For example, they expressed viewpoints that they considered to be the same or different from the opinion expressed in the interview. They also related personal experiences or anecdotes about others, described their values, and in some cases, expressed doubts about themselves. These occurrences demonstrated how the students saw themselves in relation to others, in other words, how they positioned themselves.

Each of the interviews triggered responses that emerged at the time due to a variety of factors. I expected that students' interpretations of the interview ideas would be somehow different over time as their training progressed, and they learned more. The students' positioning seemed to be prompted by specific interviews, so I have considered the responses chronologically for the ways students described themselves in relation to others.

### **Positioning in the responses to Moe (July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000)**

The students all seemed to have found something which confirmed their beliefs or seemed informative in Moe's interview. One student who responded in a monologue made a point of establishing his credentials as an experienced technician in a field other than appliance servicing. Students in the second group were able to discuss their

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<sup>46</sup> M.B. Interview Class Response 1, lines 302 to 305

uncertainties about how their skills might be received in the field and show support for each other's efforts to interpret the interview. The third group demonstrated their collaboration in the almost choral quality of their discussion and the active use of clarification strategies to develop consensus.

### **Positioning in the responses to T.L. (July 17, 2000)**

The group responses to T.L.'s interview were different than the responses which had emerged after Moe's interview. Individuals expressed strong feelings of concern about their potential success in the appliance servicing field: how their skills might be viewed; how their English might be a problem; even, how choosing Appliance Servicing may have been a big mistake.<sup>47</sup>

### **Positioning in the responses to Ilia (August 8, 2000)**

Students had positive opinions about Ilia and what he had to say, identifying with his immigrant experience and welcoming his understanding attitude toward language learners. Several times, students related personal experiences or anecdotes from acquaintances or instructors to demonstrate their understanding of the ideas Ilia had presented. The students could imagine working for Ilia in order to learn more about appliance servicing and prepare themselves to start their own businesses. Even as they discussed the concerns Ilia had expressed about future developments in appliance servicing, the students considered how the changes might affect them.

### **Positioning in the responses to J.S. (September 20, 2000)**

The student who spoke the most also seemed to have more than one related anecdote to share and opinions he wanted to promote. However, consensus was not evident when he repeatedly introduced the idea of a standard labour fee for a given job. A quieter student raised the language issue which ended with someone else saying that as long as the technician and customer could understand each other, all would be well.

J.: He said that –uh-  
English is –uh... English sleep-

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<sup>47</sup> This student had also mentioned to me that the dust in the College appliance shop was affecting his asthma, so he was not sure if he could work in this field.

English speak English is –uh–  
 clear and very well and  
 that is a bonus.  
 H.: (*word?*) bonus.  
 J.: But if you –uh– your English is –uh...  
 T.: So so...It's okay... It's okay.  
 J.: (*words?*) not that important. <sup>48</sup>

Finally, one student expressed concern about passing judgment on businesses with inflated prices for parts or low labour rates because of all the difficulties facing small businesses that are just trying to survive.

### **Positioning in the responses to R.S. (October 4, 2000)**

The idea of accepting low wages in order to gain more experience in a shop created a rift in one group between those who felt it was an unrealistic expectation to have of new graduates and one student who said he had no problem with it. Personal information was introduced in an effort to discredit the individual who had initially objected that people should be in the habit of saving, so financial problems would not surprise them.

The one apparent difference of opinion in the other group discussion never emerged as a conflict because members of the group changed the subject, and the person who had offered the opinion presented a new opinion, more consistent with the others' views. In discarding his initial reaction, the student effectively positioned himself with his peers.

### **Positioning in the responses to Doug (October 11, 2000)**

Students disagreed with Doug about the value of rebuilding used appliances, the size of company that would offer the best opportunities, and the necessity of having five-years experience to be qualified. One student remarked that the same advice was given in this interview and past interviews about graduates needing more experience. A different student said some individuals need less experience than others, but didn't refer to the previous interview with R.S., a service manager, who had made a similar remark. Another student outlined the possibility of working towards a position in appliance research and development.

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<sup>48</sup> J.S. Interview Group 1 Response, lines 369 to 382

One of the groups ended the discussion with consensus, initiated by one student. The students in the other group focused on giving each member a chance to speak. Although students disagreed with some of Doug's interview, no conflicts emerged in this second group. No one in the first group mentioned that the student anecdote about amateur repair disasters had been previously introduced by a technical instructor in the College.

### **Positioning in the responses to M.B. (December 12/13, 2000)**

Within days of graduating, students demonstrated they identified with service technicians in several ways. Not only did students share personal anecdotes about their own service work, but some expressed concern about professionalism and indicated their loyalty to members of the trade by giving established technicians the benefit of the doubt when it came to the use of service charges. Students also offered each other procedural advice for the problem of making appointments.

The differences of opinion they had on the topic of giving free service were unresolved, but their disagreement mirrored opposing views in the field of appliance service: not only M.B.'s practice of giving neighbours free repairs, but the technical instructor's directive not to offer their services for free were considered.

### ***Structure of the task***

In the beginning, the task of listening to the interview and then recording responses was interpreted differently by some students. Consequently, two students elected to record themselves individually, rather than in discussion with others. Their monologues produced information about listening comprehension and individual resources, but nothing about managing conversation or negotiating meaning. Before the second interview listening task, I told the class that recording group interaction was preferable to individual 'monologues.'

The aim of identifying the important topics with participation from everyone may also have influenced the process. Some students talked about the main ideas in the order given in the interview. Not only might the notes made while students listened to the interviews have affected their choice of topics and the sequencing of their responses,

but they may have influenced the time spent on each subject. Moreover, the response task sometimes became a matter of taking turns, each student presenting the ideas they considered significant and supporting each other's efforts without any disagreement.

Although these task requirements could make the listening-response activity somewhat contrived and less spontaneous, the group discussion framework offered significant advantages over individual responses. Discussing their interpretations of the interviews, students had opportunities to compare their impressions and identify ideas requiring clarification. Since the interview listening experiences were shared, students sometimes referred to other interviews to draw comparisons or lend support to a view.

### ***Summary***

The seven recorded interviews with appliance service technicians gave students insights into some employment options they might anticipate after graduation, the hiring expectations some employers have, and the daily challenges technicians face in the field when a difficult repair problem arises. However, the ideas that students spent the most time discussing did not necessarily match the topics emphasized by the interview subjects. For example, T.L., a service manager, stressed that communication was a significant concern when appliance service technicians made house calls. After hearing the interview with T.L., all the students mentioned this topic of communication, but indicated much more interest in his comments about having no job openings in the company. These differences in perspective point to factors for consideration when using these interviews for instructional purposes.

The topics students chose, the discursive resources they exhibited, and the ways they identified their positioning with respect to others are only three aspects of the sixteen student responses. However, these data point to how the students engaged with the recorded interviews and the discussions that followed, how well they were equipped at the time to express themselves in English, and how they positioned themselves with respect to the appliance servicing field at various times over the six-month period. When the structure of the task is also taken into consideration, the student responses offer some indications of how the taped interviews could be further utilized for vocational language training.

My initial focus in this research project was to learn how the interviews might serve to inform the students and prompt them to share their observations about their shared career goal. The data indicated that the interviews could elicit various kinds of responses, and students often branched off into related subjects they considered important at the time. Although these recorded responses were specific to the individuals involved, they feature a variety of communication skills that could exist in this kind of combined-skills class and a range of positions students took as they reflected on different issues. My final goal in examining these responses as data was to identify how to make the interviews more accessible to language learners and provide related tasks that offer the most benefits to these appliance-servicing students.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### *Using recorded interviews in the classroom*

My objective in studying the student responses was to discover the value of the seven interviews as instructional aids. As I had anticipated, these listeners demonstrated their engagement with the seven recorded interviews through their participation in the task of determining topics of importance to them. The student responses also showed the kinds of language resources they had at the time and the way they positioned themselves as they shared opinions. These three aspects of the data provided information not only about the interview content the students valued, but the language skills they had and the expectations they held at different times about work in the field. While the students' recall of various topics confirmed that the interviews could be engaging, my observations about the students' language resources and positioning have contributed to my understanding of how the instructional potential of the recordings might be more fully developed.

After hearing each interview, these appliance-servicing students were able to find topics to discuss. However, in identifying the ideas that students found significant, I think it is necessary to remember some of the factors that likely influenced their perceptions at the time. For example, the order of the interview listening tasks and their occurrence within the context of the appliance training are two aspects of the students' experience that would probably have affected their responses. Differences in the presentation and execution of the task might also have shaped the students' attitudes. Moreover, each individual's personal experiences, communication skills, and technical proficiency with appliance servicing could have been factors contributing to students' perceptions of the interviews. In spite of these variables, the sixteen responses offered some consistency in the interview ideas students recalled as important.

In recording the interviews, I had hoped the information offered by technicians in the field might contribute to the students' smooth transition from college training to the workplace.

My interviews with appliance service professionals elicited information about employer expectations, as well as the attitudes, values, and practices associated with this trade. The appliance experts said that a technician should enjoy solving challenging repair problems,

M: Every time the problem is different than the other one.  
Same complaint, but a different problem.  
And -... - challenge is what keeps me going.  
If there was no challenge, I would just quit.<sup>49</sup>

demonstrate an ability to build a rapport with people,

T.L.: I don't mind if somebody has problems talking to me,  
but if they can't talk to the customer ... you've lost it.<sup>50</sup>

and have the maturity to appear confident, but humble around more experienced technicians.

Ilia: I'm afraid of people who knows everything.  
Yeah, yeah. Lots of people come in and - ...- they will -  
you ask a question and they know everything -  
They most experienced people and - ...-  
after you put them - ...- to work or check - ...-  
they don't know much and - ... - you can see right away.<sup>51</sup>

All of these remarks indicate workplace attitudes and behaviour which can affect a new employee's ability to 'fit in' and participate in the workplace. If meeting these expectations of employers and fellow workers is part of being accepted on the job, it seems that an awareness of these attitudes should facilitate the trainee's ability to adjust to the new work situation. Furthermore, it follows that how the trainee's own views compare with the perspectives of practitioners in the field will affect the ease with which the individual develops an identity compatible with the career goal.

On hearing each of the seven interviews, students recalled these expectations of employers and service technicians, often expressing areas of agreement and disagreement among themselves as well as with the experts interviewed. For example,

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<sup>49</sup> Moe interview, lines 155 to 158.

<sup>50</sup> TL interview, lines 398 to 400.

<sup>51</sup> Ilia interview, lines 367 to 371.



the idea that a technician could not be considered fully qualified without five years on the job prompted student reaction, especially from those with previous technical experience:

A.: I don't think it true. It depend on... person.  
 Maybe one, they will learn it,  
 and become good technician  
 after one year or two years!<sup>52</sup>

One apparent benefit of the response activity would seem to be in giving students these opportunities to share their concerns with peers, activating a sense of community in their cohort group, while they negotiated the value of the interview information together.

According to Wenger's model, these appliance-servicing students would be part of a specific community of practice within the college environment. In the context of the response task, engagement would be indicated by a student's contribution of ideas, and the acceptance or rejection of those ideas by the group would affect his participation. During their discussions, students shared their imagined reactions to different situations on the job and expressed empathy with the professionals. Students also aligned themselves with one or more communities of practice by identifying with specific concerns. In these respects, Wenger's three modes of belonging provide a way to categorize evidence of active membership in a community of practice.

Discursive psychology offers a means of examining how the discourse functioned. The language resources students had were demonstrated in the way they used English to express their views. When students showed frustration with their language limitations or used common expressions inaccurately, the influence of language resources became evident. The positions students took with respect to various ideas that arose indicated a range of attitudes related to how they viewed themselves and tried to establish identities within the group. These indications of self occurred as students compared their opinions with the technicians interviewed as well as with their peers. Examining the student discourse provided me with insights into not only the students' overall engagement with the task, but how I might be able to make the information in the interviews more accessible to students and how additional tasks might prompt students to use more of the new language available in the interviews. However, it is also necessary to consider

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<sup>52</sup> Doug interview response group 2, lines 79 to 82

each interview for the specific instructional issues that emerged during the students' responses.

### ***Using the interviews to learn about appliance servicing***

The recorded interviews with appliance service professionals provided a range of perspectives and experiences that elicited both positive and negative reactions from students.

#### **Moe interview**

With the over thirty years in appliance servicing, Moe was able to offer his views on operating a business for fourteen years as well as working for an established, mid-sized company. Moe used some common expressions, but not always accurately. The students had a few problems with listening comprehension, but overall, their response was positive.

#### **T.L. interview**

T.L. emphasized the importance of communication skills when technicians do house calls. However, he also mentioned there were no employment vacancies in his company and described the case of a former College student who worked in the shop as a volunteer to keep his skills up while looking for a job. The students focused on the news that there were no jobs more than on any other information T.L. had to offer.

#### **Ilia interview**

Ilia's background as an immigrant who built a family business from nothing seemed to inspire the students. Several expressed an interest in his company, citing his acceptance of language problems as well as his view that hard work and repeated practice are essential for gaining expertise. The students reacted positively, but did not seem to consider how it might be difficult to improve weak language skills simply by labouring in an appliance repair shop.

**J.S. interview**

J.S., a subcontractor, described how he had learned appliance servicing on the job. Students responded to J.S.'s description of working for an employer who insisted he push customers to buy unneeded parts. Unfortunately, students did not recall J.S.'s report of having misrepresented his credentials in the past or his experiences with customers' sharing their prejudices.

**R.S. interview**

As an immigrant who had graduated from Appliance Servicing and risen to service manager in a mid-sized company, R.S. indicated technicians might be ready for service work after a year or two of shop experience. He stated that good technicians were hard to find, partly because many people found it difficult to work for the lower wages associated with shop work and left the business. Students did not seem to have any comprehension problems.

**Doug interview**

Doug recalled his entry into the College training as a mature student and gave advice about getting a job after graduation. Students, especially those with technical backgrounds, objected to Doug's assertions that one couldn't be called a qualified technician without five-years experience. Doug referred to negative feedback from elderly customers who had had trouble communicating with non-native speakers, but students did not mention the incident.

**M.B. interview**

As the owner/operator of an appliance rental business, M.B. offered a different perspective on running a family business. He described the circumstances in which he started up his home-based business and the challenges related to providing rentals. Students objected to M.B.'s view that one of his customers did not want to pay for services rendered because she came from a country where some people worked in virtual slavery conditions.

### **S.R.N. interview (not heard by students)**

Although students did not hear this interview, S.R.N. had some valuable tips about literacy skills, shop work, and conducting a job search by cold calling. The interview was withheld from students because I was concerned about how his report of having spent two years unemployed after graduation might affect them.

Each appliance service expert had valuable insights to offer students, but sometimes various ideas dominated to such an extent that other useful information seemed to have been ignored.

- 1. Interviews could be edited into segments with common themes, so students could more readily compare and contrast the various perspectives experts expressed.**

### ***Using the interviews for appliance-service language learning***

Penny Ur (1981) in her book, Discussions that work: Task-centred fluency practice, described a successful discussion in a language-learning situation as having the participation of all the students with "apparent motivation" (p. 3), which usually means the subject matter is closely-related to the students' lives (p. 16). From the apparent involvement of students in the responses, I think it's reasonable to conclude that they demonstrated interest in the interviews with appliance service personnel. However, this said, the student responses also suggest the interviews could be associated with explanatory materials and exercises that would solve some of the evident comprehension problems and produce more opportunities for language learning.

According to Michael Lewis (2000), known for his pioneering work on the lexical approach to English language training, "accuracy is based on fluency" (p. 174), but the teacher's role is "to constantly facilitate the accurate observation by learners of appropriate parts of the input they meet" (p. 185). Lewis specifically identified institutionalized expressions and fixed collocations used in functional language as important for language learners with a vocational orientation (Lewis, 1993, 93-94). To this end, he advised teachers to provide short, authentic material in combination with prepared instructions to guide students before and during the listening activity (Lewis, 1993, 186). This approach would undoubtedly make the interview materials more

accessible to all the students and take advantage of common expressions that emerged in the appliance-service technicians' language.

The student responses also provide information about how the language of the interviews could be featured more prominently in the task. Students in the discussions completed the task in various ways, indicated topics of interest at the time, demonstrated their language resources, and established various positions on topics that emerged. However, even with fluency practice as a focus, other language skills could be included to improve students' comprehension and communication skills.

### **Topics students identified**

I asked the students to notice the important ideas in each of the interviews. What was meant by important was to be determined by the students themselves in their recorded responses. In most cases, the points they mentioned were consistent with my observations about the interviews, but the degree of importance students gave specific ideas was evident in the time spent on different topics. Naturally, students tended to focus on points that seemed to provide practical guidance for them as new technicians, so that reports about poor employment prospects in specific companies or years of accepting poor wages for shop work were discouraging. Because these employment topics were so significant, the communications skills needed for customer service in English were recalled by students, but not always given equal consideration during their discussions.

- 2. Specific content in each interview could be identified by pre-listening or post-listening focus questions.**
- 3. To increase student awareness of communications difficulties in the field, follow-up role-play exercises could be developed around some of the kinds of service situations technicians might encounter.**

### **Discursive resources students used**

I learned from the responses that the sharing of information taking place during the discussions did not always compensate for weaknesses in individual resources. Some of the English vocabulary, like 'prejudice,' was unfamiliar to several of my students. Vocabulary limitations had a significant effect on listening comprehension.

**4. Vocabulary words for each interview would have been helpful before the listening task.**

Idiomatic expressions, relevant proverbs, and common collocations sometimes emerged in the interviews or in the student responses. These chunks of language seemed to contribute to perceptions of fluency, but lack of accuracy tended to undermine their successful deployment by second-language speakers and draw attention away from the speaker's message.

**5. Idioms, relevant proverbs, and common collocations could be featured, so that students would be better equipped to notice and reproduce them as needed.**

During the responses, more than one incident occurred of a student using obscene language to refer to a technical procedure or a common expression in the shop. Although this kind of language may be appropriate in some work situations, it seems obvious that students should have both an awareness of potential problems and the alternative language to avoid embarrassment.

**6. If slang and obscene or profane expressions are normal in specific kinds of work situations, I think they should be included in vocational language training, so that students can be made aware of alternative language for use in more formal circumstances.**

### **Positions students took**

Students made connections between themselves and the technicians interviewed in a variety of different ways. Sometimes, individuals identified themselves as having similar experiences or opinions as those described in an interview. At other times, students expressed how they differed from the technician interviewed and contributed personal anecdotes or other information to support their views. Occasionally, their appliance instructors' advice entered into the discussion to contribute to the group interpretation.

As might be expected, responses seemed more positive when the interview content was encouraging to new technicians. When an interview included discouraging information about employment, useful advice in the recording became less evident as some students focused on their disappointment.

**7. Judicious editing of the interviews could help students readily identify the most useful information for entry-level technicians without leading them to have unrealistic expectations about the job market.**

Many times, the student responses indicated a collaborative approach to learning as less fluent speakers used various strategies to contribute to the efforts of more proficient speakers, who provided assistance in return. Many of the student discussions involved exchanging views and negotiating meaning, as well as recalling details of the interviews. Students shared common information from their classes along with their feelings and experiences at that particular stage of their course. At various times, students rallied to reduce conflicts or problems that interfered with their efforts to reach consensus. These aspects of the student responses contribute to viewing this cohort as a community of practice in transition with these individuals as members.

***Responses to the structure of the task***

From the beginning, I suggested students list topics as they heard them in the interviews. Some students made notes while listening to the interviews, but others did not do so as they became familiar with the process.

**8. Specific tasks during the listening would help students focus on various aspects of the interview.**

The note-making often seemed to affect the order of topics in the responses. This would likely change with different listening tasks, but the listing of topics might also be avoided.

**9. By using various criteria and methods for choosing discussion topics, the students might give more time to selecting topics for discussion, rather than simply listing them.**

In general, the fluency practice provided in the group discussions offered opportunities for students to share information, check comprehension, express opinions, and negotiate interpretations in English among peers. It also provided students with a reason to speak about work-related issues in English. While students may also benefit from having their attention drawn to specific features of the language, group discussions offer a means of encouraging students to develop their English fluency on various topics of interest.

**10. The opportunity for open-ended discussion should continue to be included when these interview tapes are used.**

### ***Summary***

The responses to the seven recorded interviews with appliance servicing technicians provide evidence that the listening task offered students chances to identify qualities that are valued by experts in the field. Students also gained insights into commonly-held attitudes in the workplace. Some ideas expressed in the interviews were disturbing, often because students had formed other impressions beforehand, but sometimes because the views of students conflicted with those of the technicians interviewed. Perhaps the greatest benefit the unedited interview tapes offered as instructional aids was in eliciting student discussion of these controversies. These conversations not only gave students practice in negotiating the value of different perspectives, but offered them a means of sharing their concerns about making a successful transition to employment.

The next step is to not only encourage fluency practice, but develop instructional aids for each interview that will assist students in identifying useful language for the appliance servicing workplace. The student responses indicated a need for a greater familiarity with specific vocabulary, collocations, idiomatic expressions, and alternative language for different social situations. My research project has confirmed my expectations that these recorded interviews would be engaging and informative for these students. I believe the development of supplementary materials would further enhance the value of these interviews for appliance servicing trainees in the language classroom. In addition, excerpts from the interviews, edited for their common themes, would draw attention to the range of perspectives these professional appliance service technicians had to offer and give students a clearer comparison of existing views in the field.



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## APPENDIX: ETHICS APPROVAL

# SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA  
CANADA V5A 1S6  
Telephone: (604) 291-4370  
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June 13, 2000

Ms. Brooke Mills  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education  
Simon Fraser University

Dear Ms. Mills:

**Re: Learning About an Occupation: Communication, Practices and Personal Qualities Emerging in Conversations with Appliance Service Technicians**

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the University Research Ethics Review Committee. This approval is in effect for twenty-four months from the above date. Any changes in the procedures affecting interaction with human subjects should be reported to the University Research Ethics Review Committee. Significant changes will require the submission of a revised Request for Ethical Approval of Research. This approval is in effect only while you are a registered SFU student.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. James, R.P. Ogloff, Chair  
University Research Ethics Review Committee

c K. Toohey, Supervisor

/bjr