

A Study of an Online Community of Practice for EFL Learning in a Chinese University

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to report the investigation of an online communication group as a supplementary media for student learning English; and to report how communication online may facilitate student learning and student-teacher relationship. Drawing literature on reflection and Communities of Practice (CoPs), a case study was undertaken involving 31 students in an online communication group (a QQ group with technology supported by qq.com). Data were collected from Questionnaires with students before and after the study and archives of online communication activities. It was found that most of the students were willing to communicate with their teacher and fellow students online; the online discussions covered a variety of topics, such as learning English, future career, future study, and topics relating to university life. It was also found that time of access online, Internet connection, and the students' need of obtaining prompt solutions of their learning problems are the main factors that hindered their participation in the online CoP.

Keywords: Community of Practice, EFL, online learning

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Introduction

Education reforms and new English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabus in Chinese tertiary education advocates a more communicative way of language teaching which has brought about the need for a shift in ELT pedagogies towards a more student-centred and communicative approach. Teachers need to adopt a more student-centred approach where they take roles as facilitators of student learning (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005; Nunan, 1989). Modern technology has made it possible for teacher-students online communication. In this context, more research is needed to seek how online communication groups may facilitate communication between teachers and students, and communication among students. This study developed and implemented an online learning group using a Community of Practice (CoP) framework for student learning.

The aim of this study was to investigate students' learning English in an online communication group; and to consider how communication online may facilitate student learning and student-teacher relationship.

Theoretical framework

This study adopted the Community of Practice model as the theoretical framework. The idea of Communities of Practice was first promoted in organizational and management contexts (e.g., Fei, 2006; Fitzsimmons, 2008; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). It was defined as groups of professionals who share a repertoire of resources while participating in a process of collaborative learning, which promotes the solution to problems (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, et al., 2002; Wick, 2000). The three main features of CoPs in organizational learning include mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). For example, students who share a concern or a passion for learning meet regularly for communication (mutual engagement) to share their knowledge and experiences (shared repertoire) to improve their learning (a joint enterprise).

With support of modern technology, the CoP model has been extended to online communication. Online CoPs has been proved to be effective in terms of helping students to build their understanding (Goos & Bennison, 2007), work together, and be facilitated by other learners (Bette, 2004; Mohan, 2006; Scott & Robert, 2005).

Methods

This study was conducted in the English department of a Chinese University. Due to ethical considerations, the name of the University is concealed and given the pseudonym of "University L". As a teacher in that university, the researcher had access to the context. Therefore, it was selected because it was perhaps an expected site for the researcher to carry out research (Patton, 2002). Thirty-one students from one class volunteered to participate in the study. Among them there were 28 female students and three male students.

The researcher joined in and interacted with the participants in the online community. For example, she communicated with students online and answered some of their

questions. Yin (2009) suggested that as a participant, a researcher was able to get access to evidence of a phenomenon from an insider's point of view.

During the two months when this study was undertaken, students communicated online in the set-up QQ group (with technology supported by Tencent Company). Their online discussions and postings were downloaded and saved as a Word document for further analysis. The online communication group are easily assessable and replicable. Students could access the group at anytime convenient for them. In this study, one QQ group was set up by one of the volunteered student named "Dream" in March. As the online manager of the group, she authorized the membership of the teacher in the group on April 1. In the current study the students either had their own personal computers or their smart phones, and could easily access the QQ group. They were invited to participate in online discussions. The postings were then archived for the purpose of data analysis.

In this study, data were also collected through questionnaires, which student completed before and after they participated in the study to investigate their use of online communication tools, their expectations, and their experiences when participating in the study.

Findings and Discussions

Pre-Questionnaire

In the preliminary questionnaire, the students were asked questions relating to their daily use Internet communication tools. Among the 31 students who completed the questionnaires, all of them had the experience of communication with others online. Twenty-eight students had set up their online blogs. They mainly write about their study, their personal life experience, and their feelings.

As for the reasons that students did not blog, one student mentioned that they regarded blogging as keeping diaries. Since she had no interest in keeping a diary, she did not blog. Another student thought her writing was not good. So she could not blog online.

Their former schoolmates in high school, their friends, and their former teachers are those they often communicate online. They communicated with their contacts on a regular basis.

When students were asked whether they would like to communicate with their current teachers online, all of them gave positive answers. They not only expected to discuss with their teachers about study, but also problems in their daily life.

Online CoP Activities

In this study, the postings from April 1 to May 31 of both students and teachers were archived for the purpose of analyzing how students communicated online with their peers and their teacher. Data were transcribed to one Word document and then analyzed through Content Analysis. Data were read and grouped under different themes.

There were 29 students participated in the online CoP and contributed to 37 threads of discussions. Students either used their real names or online nicknames, whichever they felt comfortable with. There were online communication activities on 28 days.

They are summarized in Table 1 and 2.

Participation Frequencies (37 Discussions)	Initiators
Liu19 Celery 11 Lily 9 Zhao 8 Tung 7 Cloud 6 Dawn 6 Cao5 Wong 4	The teacher 17 Liu 7 Badgirl1 Celery3
20 students joined the discussions less than 2 times	Stove 1 Zhao 1 Chen 1 Tung 2 Ice 2 Cao 2

Table 1. General Participation in the Online CoP

Main themes and categories found in the online communication archives are listed in Table 2.

Themes	Categories	Frequencies*
Study/Learning	Announcements (Study related)	7
	Sharing Resources	5
	English Movies	6
	Courses Selection	3
	English Reading	1
	English Listening	1
	Translation	1
University Life	Weekend, Holiday, Skincare	7
General Greetings	Saying “Hi”	6
Inquiry for Teacher’s Former Experiences	Teacher’s former learning experience, career choice	4
Announcements (other)	University life related	3

Table 2. Main Themes and Categories in the Online Discussions. *There is not necessarily one category of discussion on each day.

Table 2 shows that the main themes of discussions in the online CoP include topics relating to learning, university life, general greetings, inquiry for the teacher’s former experiences as a students, and general announcements related to university life. Under the theme, topics relating to learning, there were seven announcements made regarding coursework and exams, six discussions regarding what English movies they were interested in watching, five discussions on sharing resources of English learning, such as sample exam questions and presentation materials, three discussions regarding courses selection. There was one discussion each relating to English reading, listening, and translation. Furthermore, students also made announcements which were related to their university life, such as health checkup arrangements and student union election. This indicates that students used the online CoP as a platform to share information and discussed topics relating to English learning.

Students also talked about other topics regarding their university life, such as holiday plan, doing part-time jobs, and even skincare and luxury products. As a platform of social network, the online CoP was used by students to share information and problems about their daily life. It solved some of students’ problems. Sharing

information and resources and sharing problems in their constructed main activities in the online CoP.

Students were also interested in the teacher's former experiences as a university student when they were asked to make decisions regarding course selection which would affect their future choice of career. According to concepts of CoPs, member brought different expertise to one community. In the case of this study, the teacher brought her former experiences to share with the students on a basis of requirements. Students then learned from those experiences and made their own decisions.

To summarise, students not only discussed topics relating to their English learning online, they were also interested in other topics of their university life and their teachers former experience. They used the online group not only for the purpose of sharing information, but also as a media for solving problems in their study and their university life. This also proved the main characteristics of CoPs as sharing expertise and mutual engagement.

Post-Questionnaire

Students were asked to complete one questionnaire on June 1, when it was two months after they participated in the study and the end of the semester.

Twenty-nine students reported in the questionnaire that they had communicated with their teacher online. This was in consistency with what was found during the two weeks of online communication that 29 students contributed to online discussion activities. As it was not compulsory for students to join the online QQ group, students had the right to choose not to do it. The two students who did not join the group reported why they did not participated in the discussions. One reported that he/she had negative ideas towards online communication, such as it was not real and others could cause misunderstandings, the other reported that he/she joined the group at the end of May, therefore, he/she did not participated in the online communication activities.

Twenty-eight students participated in the online CoP, found it helpful to communicate with their classmates and their teacher online. The main benefit they reported was to solve their learning problems and improve their learning. For instance:

When I couldn't understand a question regarding learning and I put the question online, someone will give me an answer
By communicating with others I can find out some problems I have.
And I can try to take their advice.

Students also reported that online communication could help them to encourage one another and be relaxed to take to their teacher:

Talking with classmates is useful. Because we have the same feeling and sometimes we encourage each other to go on working hard.
Ms. Wang is of unique charisma. I will feel relaxed to talk with her online. But I will feel nervous, if I talk with her face-to-face.

As for the factors that hindered their participation online, 23 students gave out reasons (the remaining 8 students reported that they did not have any difficulties). The main factors that hindered students participation in the online CoP included: time of get access to the Internet was not the same, typing slowly, the prompt need of solving problems.

To summarize, students confirmed the positive effects of participating in the online CoP, such as helping them to solve learning problems so as to improve their learning. It was found that after participated in the study, students were more willing to communicate with their teacher and fellow students online than before. The factors that could hinder their participation online included the access time, Internet connections, typing speed, and the need of prompt answers to their questions.

Significance of the study

In light of Chinese tertiary education reforms towards students learning autonomy in tertiary ELT, this study was timely in investigating an online learning community for facilitate students communication with their peers and their teacher. Students were provided with opportunities to discuss their English learning online. This study may contribute a deeper understanding of developing online communities for students learning. While the CoP model has become a popular model for learning in the West, there was little evidence of the exploration of the effectiveness of this model in the Chinese context. Therefore, consideration of building an online CoP in this study built on knowledge of how online learning communities might work to address the needs of Chinese college English learners.

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