


A Systematic Review of Community of Practice (CoP) in Informal Learning Communities of English Teachers and Learners

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ABSTRACT

Communities of Practice (CoP) have gained notice in informal learning communities. A substantial number of studies examine the employment of CoP to facilitate collective learning. However, little is known about its implementation for English language teachers or learners. In this study, 20 studies conducted between 2019 and 2023 on CoP that involved either English teachers or learners were systematically reviewed to offer a new understanding of this specific context. An analysis was comprehensively done to reveal the research context, interaction mode, activities, and challenges. The findings uncovered that most of the analyzed studies were conducted in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. Three kinds of approaches have been adopted in running the learning communities: on-site, online, and blended mode. Various activities were also employed to facilitate collective learning in communities. In addition, challenges during interaction within communities are discussed. Based on the analyses, pedagogical implications and research areas that demand more investigation are also addressed.

Keywords: *English Language, CoP, Informal Learning, Systematic Review.*

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INTRODUCTION

Informal learning has become more and more pivotal in language acquisition due to technological progress and changing learning motivation. Informal learning occurs outside formal classrooms and draws upon various resources and contexts to facilitate the development of language. This systematic literature review reports the studies of Community of Practice (CoP) as a social learning concept used by English teachers and learners. It departs from the fact that an in-depth understanding of English language teaching and learning contexts is still lacking in many of the earlier studies on CoP. Informal learning communities become essential for English teachers and learners when a formal learning environment is often inadequate for facilitating mutual knowledge sharing, reciprocal learning, shared understanding, and collaboration. Therefore, further research is necessary to determine whether CoP can help English teachers and students pursue continuous, informal learning opportunities. In this study, the authors first provide a succinct overview of CoP research and then discuss the research objectives that served as the direction for this systematic review.

Community of Practice (CoP) has garnered ample attention in social learning theories. It is the notion of learning outside formal education institutions where mutual learning occurs among community members (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, 1998). It has been employed as an underlying framework in a wide array of professional development studies or learning communities (Beatty et al., 2020; Kong, 2018; Romero & Vasilopoulos, 2020; Tavakoli, 2015; Wesely, 2013). In CoP, there is a concept called

legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The significance of this idea is that for their involvement to be 'legitimate' and progress to being full members, there should be an opportunity for newcomers to a community to access resources for their involvement. By accessing resources, new community members can assess various roles and responsibilities that contribute to their expertise (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger's concept of CoP consists of three key elements: *mutual engagement* (how community members interact with each other and respond to each other's activities and how this engagement promotes the establishment of relationships); *joint enterprise* (the way community members comprehend, participate in, and accept responsibility for the community's development); and *shared repertoire* (the capability to transform a variety of resources into something useful for the community members) (Wenger, 1998). Joining a community of practice is part of the skills necessary to support English language teachers' professional development (Richards, 2010). Concurrently, CoP offers teachers professional development opportunities that can contribute to students' learning achievement (Gómez & Suárez, 2021). A CoP can also facilitate sustainable professional development through communal responsibility (Mak & Pun, 2015).

CoP has been explored using numerous methodologies, demonstrating its growing popularity and contribution to promoting professional development and retrospective learning through communities. A quantitative study involving 16 ESL teachers from a vocational college joining a community of practice through WeChat was conducted (Kong, 2018). The study yielded positive results as it increased teachers' abilities in teaching and research. It also stimulated a positive culture of sharing. Likewise, a mixed-methods study was carried out (Romero, 2021) by investigating novice English teachers' experiences when joining school communities. Apart from some downsides encountered during their participation in the communities, the teachers could learn how to transform the obstacles of the early years of teaching into opportunities. Interviewing 20 English teachers in England (Tavakoli, 2015), the researcher undertook a qualitative study to investigate their perspectives on the divide between research and practice. Using CoP theory in interpreting the data, the study shows that their participation in CoP is essential in constructing their professional identity and practice. Meanwhile, a large-scale study on CoP (Brinton et al., 2020) was conducted in Cambodia to describe the development of a CoP model to facilitate English teachers' professional development. It highlighted the collaboration between experienced and beginner teachers and the assistance given to individual teachers in navigating their professional development opportunities.

On the other hand, a case study was carried out (Aguirre-Garzon & Castaneda-Pena, 2017), which involved four English teachers in a Colombian school. The study explored their participation in a community in constructing didactic knowledge, procedural knowledge, and future improvement (Aguirre-Garzon & Castaneda-Pena, 2017). Unlike the studies above, a literature review study was conducted (Kimura, 2018), providing a rationale and opportunity for implementing CoP theory in applied linguistic studies. Highlighting Wenger's three features of CoP – domain, community, and practice – demonstrated how CoP theory could be employed to facilitate the professional development of five female teachers (Kimura, 2018).

There have been some studies of CoP, but they mainly employed methods other than a systematic literature review, so they failed to provide a rich synthesis of empirical understanding of CoP. A systematic literature review in this context is still under-researched. Although one study employed a literature review approach (Kimura, 2018), it was conducted less systematically, so it was inadequate in providing a rich, empirical understanding of CoP theory. In addition, it lacked a comprehensive view and synthesized findings from previous CoP studies, especially in English language teaching and learning. To better understand the use of CoP in English language teaching and learning, the authors examined the appropriate amount of literature to offer a comprehensive picture of the present state of CoP among English teachers and learners. To meet this aim, the present review investigates the following research questions: (1) What contexts have been studied? (2) What activities have been

investigated in CoPs? (3) How were CoPs implemented? (4) What challenges emerged when implementing CoPs?

METHOD

The systematic review's inclusion criteria for publications were guided by the research questions. The researchers independently conducted searches of libraries to find pertinent research published in peer-reviewed academic journals. To ensure currency, the selected articles were those published from 2019 to 2023. The articles were from major databases, i.e., Taylor & Francis, ERIC, SAGE publications, Science Direct, and Cambridge.org. Those databases were selected because of their reputation as prominent resource providers with many articles related to CoP. The terms used in searching the relevant articles were "Community of Practice," "English community," "learning community," and "English learning community." The procedure in this systematic review adopted PRISMA stages consisting of identification, screening and eligibility, evaluation, and inclusion (Liberati et al., 2009; Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2019). Firstly, articles using the determined key terms were identified ($n = 115$). Then, screening was done by removing articles with the same titles (duplicates) and excluding those unrelated to English language teachers or learners by examining the titles and abstracts. The remaining articles were then reviewed for eligibility, leaving out those that did not employ CoP as their main theoretical foundation. Finally, 20 articles were included for analysis and synthesis in this study. The researchers reviewed each article individually and noted any new themes or keywords in their annotated bibliography. The four major overlapping themes included study contexts, types of activities, ways of interaction, and characteristics of CoP. The researchers then compared their collection of emergent themes and marked keywords to create a collaborative spreadsheet. To compile and record pertinent data for each area, the researchers reread the collected papers, focusing on the developing themes. In order to collect and improve the findings, the researchers then collectively evaluated, analyzed, and contested them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections display the findings related to the research questions by presenting the essential aspects: the research contexts, the learning activities, the mode of learning interaction, and the challenges. Following each section, pedagogical implications and future research directions are also highlighted.

Research Contexts

Most of the studies (15 out of 20) were conducted in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). Two studies were conducted where English is a second language (Ganapathy et al., 2020; Sadik, 2021), and one was conducted in English as the first language (Kayi-Aydar & Goering, 2019). While one study was undertaken in the context of English as an international language (Tajeddin et al., 2021), another study did not explicitly mention the context (Jin et al., 2022).

Among the 20 reviewed studies, 12 included communities of teachers, three involved pre-service teacher communities, two included student communities, two involved student and teacher communities, and one study included a community of teaching assistants. Whereas most studies looked at how communities of practice facilitate collective learning among a particular group, either teachers or learners, two studies (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020) looked at how teachers and students sheltered in one learning community. In Zhang (2020), an online learning community was created to benefit both teachers and learners. Teachers could gain insight into how students feel and view the learning tasks, while students could evaluate their learning through peer learning. Meanwhile, in Martin-Beltrán et al. (2019), language-minority and language-majority students were engaged in a community with their teachers, in which their engagement pattern was analyzed. It is

interesting how different approaches can shed light on the benefits of communities of practice in English language teaching or learning. The future research direction could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of different types of activities in communities of practice and how to ensure equal participation and opportunities among members. Additionally, further research could investigate the potential downsides of using social media to facilitate collective learning and how to mitigate these risks. Future studies could also explore the challenges and benefits of implementing communities of practice in different contexts and for different purposes.

Modes of the activities

In the reviewed studies, the community of practice was enacted through three different kinds of interaction: on-site (six studies), online (11 studies), and blended interaction (three studies). It is interesting to see that communities of practice were enacted through various types of interaction. This information could be helpful for anyone looking to implement a community of practice in their organization. Regarding online modes of interaction, technologies used included the web, virtual conference tools, videos, blogs, and social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). The online communities in the analyzed studies utilized both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Most of the reviewed studies that employed online modes used social media to facilitate interaction and collective learning among community members (Ballıdağ & Dikilitaş, 2021; Ganapathy et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2019; Mai et al., 2020; Słagoski, 2019). The predominance of the use of online media to facilitate learning denotes that many learning communities sought platforms to facilitate collective learning less formally. As Lan et al. (2020) suggested, social media can be a helpful tool for promoting student self-regulation in English learning.

Similarly, Lai et al. (2019) asserted that peer interaction within an online learning community facilitated by social media can positively impact learning engagement and achievement. This finding implies that social media can be a powerful tool for facilitating learning. With the ability to connect with people from all over the world, share information and resources, and engage in discussions and debates, social media can help foster a sense of community and collaboration that can be incredibly beneficial for learning. However, there are also some potential downsides to using social media, such as the risk of misinformation and the potential for echo chambers to form. Ultimately, it depends on how social media is used and the specific context in which it is being used.

Activities in Communities

The analysis of the studies also revealed that various activities to facilitate collective learning were employed in communities, including co-teaching seminars, mentoring, workshops, group meetings, courses, discussions, collaboration, sharing experiences, resource requesting and sharing, and many more. While most of the communities in the reviewed studies conducted one kind of activity, some communities carried out various forms of activities to facilitate their members (Ballıdağ & Dikilitaş, 2021; Brinton et al., 2020; Ganapathy et al., 2020; Mai et al., 2020; Słagoski, 2019; Vega et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). It is interesting to see the different types of activities studied and how they may impact education. Communities can utilize diverse platforms and techniques to aid their members in different ways, which is intriguing to observe. For example, in a study by Ganapathy et al. (2020), a community was held to facilitate teachers' engagement in three major activities through Facebook: sharing educational resources, collaboration among members, and making and sustaining resources.

Additionally, Brinton et al. (2020) reported how a large-scale community provides a venue for teachers' sustainable professional development through co-teaching, involvement in a research project, presenting at local conferences, and holding presentation skills workshops. What comes into question is probably how community members can ensure participation in those vast arrays of activities. For this, it is crucial that, as Kong (2018) argues, community members feel comfortable in advantageous circumstances that can take place

through a democratic and egalitarian organizational structure. Six out of seven reviewed studies that employed various activities are similar in that they investigated teacher communities rather than students. It might be assumed that to achieve more effective professional development for teachers in a community, more than just one activity should be organized. This finding implies a research domain that can still be explored, focusing on exploring the benefits of communities of practice in different contexts, such as English as a second language or English as an international language.

Challenges

Apart from the benefits of learning communities that contribute to English language teachers' or students' learning, the analyzed studies also presented challenges in implementing communities of practice.

Table 1. Challenges of communities of practice

Challenges	Articles
Doubt about the advantages of participating in the forum due to the facilitator's lack of skill	Brinton et al. (2020)
Difficulty understanding the English accent in communication	Hakkola et al. (2020)
Tension and/or conflict among members	Kayi-Aydar & Goering (2019); Liu (2019); Vega et al. (2021)
Difficulty in giving accurate feedback	Pow & Lai (2021)
Feeling unwelcomed by senior members	Romero (2021)
Competitive relationship	Romero (2021)
Feeling hesitant to give comments or being inactive in discussions or engagement	Mai et al. (2020); Sadik (2021)
Finding an effective leader with a clear goal to raise the quality of teachers	Ikhsanudin (2021)
Low quality of postings on social media/distracting information/information pollution	Ballıdağ & Dikilitaş (2021); Slogoski (2019)
Negative attitude towards webinars	Ballıdağ & Dikilitaş (2021)

The table above shows one of the challenges that probably deserves a high degree of attention is the inevitable conflict or tension that occurs during members' interactions, which elucidates how complex a CoP can be. However, conflict should be seen positively through a different lens, as it can lead to innovation and knowledge building (Liu, 2019).

Concerning inactive participation within communities (Mai et al., 2020; Sadik, 2021), this is contradictory to the concept of CoP, which is designed to promote equal opportunities and participation among members (Kong, 2018; Perry et al., 1999; Romero & Vasilopoulos, 2020). Some conditions could drive the emergence of quiet and dominant members. First, it can be due to the community climate that is less persistent in ensuring equal participation, causing the naturally outspoken, leading individuals to dominate and leaving the timid, introverted members in favor of becoming silent observers. Secondly, it might be triggered by the participants' perceived usefulness in joining the community. Active participation, which can eventually progress to dominance, can be driven by participants' need to gain advantages through the community. Thus, the more they need to benefit from the community, the more active they tend to be.

On the contrary, passive participation might occur since some members perceive a low degree of necessity to benefit from the community. It is said that the community is less beneficial to them. The challenges when implementing CoPs could be due to the complex nature of relations and individuals (Liu & Xu, 2013; Shi & Yang, 2014; Tsui, 2007; Wenger, 1998) that can trigger disharmony (Wenger, 1998). Concurrent with this, CoPs might have drawbacks as they cannot fix all problems without generating any (Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, 2002). It could mean CoPs are like a two-edged sword, offering benefits and disadvantages. The pedagogical implication regarding the challenges is that it is vital to address the challenges to promote equal participation and opportunities among members.

Conflict or tension can be seen positively as it can lead to innovation and knowledge building, but ensuring all members have equal opportunities to anticipate is crucial.

CONCLUSIONS

This review calls to mind the growing importance of informal learning communities in supporting English teachers and learners, particularly where formal education does not promote mutual learning, shared meaning, and collaboration. It recognizes that Communities of Practice (CoP) tend to be structured through on-site, online, and blended interaction, with online spaces—particularly social media—being the most prevalent. Despite having such platforms maximize access and engagement, they bring along issues like misinformation and echo chambers potential. Other issues are interpersonal conflicts, feedback difficulties, hierarchical power structures, and hostility towards virtual modes of learning. Despite these issues, CoP are beneficial in professional development as well as in backward learning. The review also indicates areas for potential research, including exploring CoP in non-EFL environments, involving under-researched groups of individuals like pre-service teachers, and examining teacher-student collaborative communities. Further research is needed to consider the contribution of CoP to sustaining continuous, informal learning by teachers and learners.

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