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## Transforming the EFL Pedagogical Approach towards a Digital Age through Online Communities of Practice (Cops)

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive study provides an understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice (CoP) via a Facebook (FB) group among English as foreign language (EFL) learners. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive method, the data was collected from the interactional exchanges and responses to online written discussions posted by 12 EFL learners who are regular members of this CoP. A qualitative content analysis of the participants' interactional exchanges and responses in the discussions was carried out based on Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of a CoP: joint enterprise (what is about?), mutual engagement (how does it function?) and shared repertoire (what capacities has it developed?). These three dimensions which were adopted from Smith (2003) and Pearce (2010) served as macro codes for the analysis. For the joint enterprise, the findings revealed that this CoP is characterized by the EFL learners' shared interests in English, knowledge and enjoyment, negotiated enterprise and certain rhythm and rules followed by them in practicing English. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the CoP functions through the EFL learners' engaged diversity, sharing different information, relationship building and community maintenance. As a result of this, the EFL learners as members of this Cop described their sense of knowledge, language and communication skill development, sense of autonomy over their learning, sense of comfort and sense of belonging.

*Keywords:* community of practice; facebook; English as foreign language learning

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### 1. Introduction

For the last few decades, research has indicated that Social Networking Services (SNSs) have certain features pertinent to collaborative learning such as their educational value, potential and their capacity to enhance students' motivation and engagement in collaborative learning. As part of

ongoing recent research, a considerably wide body of research investigated the increasing use of these collaborative technologies among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) as a

fashionable way of learning and practicing English through collaboration and interaction in such online interactive environments. According to Cloete et al. (2009); Boyd & Ellison (2011); Lim (2012), SNSs in education offer the opportunity for such self-direction with their ability to restructure hierarchies, inform and reconfigure communication, and transform relationships with knowledge and people.

Facebook (FB) is the most popular of such SNSs among many young students at university levels. It provides its users with opportunities to create and join groups within this online community. It also assists learners to obtain, construct and exchange information and knowledge. In such communities, it is up to the individual user (or groups of users) to decide and choose what to discuss and who they want to work together with (Kabilan et al., 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2011; Yunus et al., 2012). Thus, the purpose of the current study, as a part of ongoing research, was to identify the features of the Only For English Learning CoP, an online FB-based CoP developed by the researchers to provide an out-of-classroom exposure of EFL learners to English through interaction and engagement.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Lave's & Wenger's (1991) CoP Theory*

Wenger (1998: 4) defined a CoP as "a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth while pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence". Then, the definition was further developed by Wenger et al. (2002: 4) as CoPs were defined as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis". In a CoP, learning is seen as a social practice in which members work collectively and collaboratively to achieve knowledge and development. Thus, based on this theory, any CoP is defined by three essential dimensions known as its joint enterprise as understood and continually regenerated by its members, mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity and shared repertoire or communal resources that members have developed. According to Smith (2003), those three essential components define any CoP in terms of what it is about, how it functions and what capacities it has developed among its members. According to Tu and Corry (2002: 209), in an e-learning community, "members work together to solve their problems and to improve their communities using knowledge construction media and technology".

### *2.2. Features of FB as an Interactive SN Conducive to Learning*

A body of recent research conducted on FB users in higher education in various contexts has identified certain characteristics of FB as a tool facilitating learning and contributing significantly to the quality of education. The most remarkable features are relevant to fostering learners' positive

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relationships and enhancing learners' motivation and engagement (West et al., 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010; Junco 2012); engaging them in accomplishing learning tasks and successfully transferring knowledge (Madge et al., 2009); enhancing the quality of learning (Pasek&Hargittai, 2009; Kirschner &Karpinski, 2010); promoting students' cognitive aspects such as interpersonal intelligence and critical thinking (Lampe et al., 2008); developing learner-learner's and learner-instructor's patterns of communications, interactions and collaboration outside the classes (Selwyn, 2009 &Mazman&Usluel, 2010); sharing knowledge (Mazman&Usluel, 2010) .

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Design*

In carrying out this study, a qualitative descriptive research was adopted because qualitative research can provide a researcher with the opportunity to obtain better understanding of how humans or respondents react to and experience what is implemented. It is also believed that by adopting this method, researchers attempt to approach respondents so that they can better understand their views (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Chokwe 2011). Therefore, this seems to suit the purpose of this study as it aims at seeking deeper insights and further understanding of the EFL learners' revision strategies as situated in the current EFL CoP via a Facebook group. .

#### *3.2 Context of the Study*

The Only for English Learning CoP (Figure 1) is a Facebook group which was developed as a joint effort between three EFL lecturers and the researcher in June 2011. It was developed to provide EFL students with an out-of-classroom space where they can use and practice English for real communication by creating, sharing, exchanging content and information. In other words, it aims at providing EFL learners with the opportunity to extend their language learning beyond the traditional formal classroom settings. Since its development, this CoP has attracted many EFL learners from different Asian and Arabic countries through the useful posts and activities in listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing provided by the instructors daily. The number of the members reached 20,213 members by 10/11/ 2012. However, the current study is only based on the data collected from 12 EFL learners who were selected via purposeful sampling based on these criteria: (a) their active participation in the CoP, (b) their social presence in the CoP, (c) their different levels at college, (d) their age (between 20 and 28 years old) and (e) their background context (EFL learners). Thus, the total number of the participants in the current study was 12 EFL learners coming from Arab countries except one of them who is from Philippine.



Figure1. A Print Screen of The Only for English Learning CoP via Facebook Group

### 3.3 Data Collection

The current Learning study used two sources of data: the EFL learners' interactional exchanges in the CoP and their responses to online written discussions held in several sessions. These discussions are "socially oriented research procedure" (Krueger, 1994: 34) in which data was generated through the interactions between the EFL participants in the CoP. The participants had the opportunity to react to other's comments and elaborated or modified their original views (Patton, 2002) "as a result of group discussions and dynamics (Krueger, 1994: 11). This interaction also enhanced the quality of the data as the participants provided checks and balances on each other (Patton, 2002).

### 3.4 Data analysis

The current study used a qualitative analysis of the data collected through the EFL learners' online interaction exchanges. The rationale for using this type of qualitative analysis is that content analysis is fairly unique among the qualitative methods in that it is often done utilizing quantitative analysis (Schilling 2006 & Zhang and Wildemuth 2009) which enabled the researcher not only to reveal themes based on pre-used units of analysis, but uncover newly emerging themes from the data.

The participants' interactional exchanges and responses were coded based on previously identified codes in previous research which served as the main themes for coding. These themes are the joint enterprise of the CoP, the mutual engagement and the shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998; Smith, 2003; Pearce, 2010).

## 4. Findings and discussion

Using a qualitative analysis of the data collected from the participants' interactional exchangers and responses to the questions in the online written discussions in this CoP, the findings of the current study based on the code analysis adopted from previous research on CoPs revealed that there are several characteristics of this EFL CoP that are discussed under several themes and sub-themes in this section. Thus, the main themes under which these characteristics are organized are the joint enterprise of the CoP, the mutual engagement and the shared repertoire.

### 4.1 The joint enterprise of the CoP

As far as the starting point of this EFL CoP is concerned, it is a community of EFL learners who came together to practice English and share their knowledge. This is evidenced by what was stated by the majority of the participants in the online written discussions. For instance, these samples of the EFL learners' responses reflect this aspect:

*“Ok. The members in this group gathered together with specific goal in their head, which is learning English and sharing their knowledge” (Tasnim)*

*“As far as I can see here in our group, the 3 main objectives of a community of practice are mainly;*

*1) trust 2) knowledge-sharing 3) and practice-sharing” (Tunisiano)*

Referring to the definition of CoP advocated by Barton & Tusting (2005: 2), “the starting point for the idea of a CoP is that people typically come together in groupings to carry out activities in everyday life, in the workplace and in education”. However, for this particular CoP, it is in education and specifically, in an EFL context.

Furthermore, this CoP was described by the participants as the center of collective knowledge sharing where English serves as the major medium of communication and practice:

*“With the daily use of language and communicating, the group here became a center for collective knowledge shared and practiced by all members” (Zaina)*

However, it is not only about practicing English through sharing knowledge in English, but also through having fun and enjoyment( *“And I want to add that we share fun too here we always enjoy sweet posts of Zaina and Imen brief candle (Angel Parsa).*

Negotiated enterprise refers to the state in which that not all members believe in the same thing or agree about certain things, but there is still a space for them to negotiate such things. This is also one characteristic of learning and practice in this CoP which was perceived by many of them. For instance, according to Muna Abdullah, she expressed her view of this:

*“Sometimes I find a lot of discussion and I really get useful information, and even if there are still different points of view, we can argue or negotiate and that is the importance of different thinking” (Muna).*

Through working together during in this CoP, the EFL learners follow a certain rhythm of practice in their posts and comments especially those related to academic posts in English (e.g. exercises in grammar, posts in writing revisions,). Such posts seem to be coordinated by the instructors and the members as learners have to follow them. A female participant(Salsabeel Al-Emad) commented that *“in this community, you can lean English by following up teachers' exercises and practicing what you've studied”*.

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#### 4.1 The mutual engagement of the EFL learners

And for the idea of how this participation starts in this CoP can be illustrated in Excerpt (1) of the learners' interactional exchange. This post initiated by BacemRîbéry who just joined the CoP announced to the members that he is a newcomer. In a response to this, Iman and other several members welcomed BacemRîbéry. However, looking closely at their interactional exchanges, while Iman welcomed that new member to this CoP and also provided him with information of this CoP regarding their core practice and condition of practicing "*just use English*" in a way that she made him excited, other remembers like Abu Mohammed and Angel Parsa just welcomed him and did not add more information. Thus, according to Wenger's (1998) three levels of participation within a community of practice, core, active, and peripheral, this post shows an example of these levels. Iman seemed to be one of those members at the core level of participation in this CoP since she appeared to play the role of leadership while other respondents are active participants and BacemRîbéry is still a new comer who is at the peripheral level. According to Wenger (1998: 56), the core is "the heart of the community" as they often shoulder many of the leadership roles and have much of the knowledge and history of the group. However, active group members are regular participants in the CoP but their participation level is not as intense as that of the core members (Wenger et al. 2002). Moreover, Wenger (1998: 11) further purports that entry into the community of practice is through "legitimate peripheral participation" (p.11). This legitimate peripheral participation which refers to newcomers to any CoP "provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old timers (Leave & Wenger 1991: 29). Based on the comments by old timers as responses to the post of the newcomer in this CoP, it seems that old timers in this CoP attempt to push such new members from the peripheral level to the active level of participation.

**BacemRîbéry** Hello: I'm new here.

**Iman Faith** welcome **BacemRîbéry**, you will have a nice time in this group

**BacemRîbéry** Thank you Iman ' But Can I know what this group is about? Please?

**Iman Faith** In this group, we learn English together and we have fun too, Bacem, and you're free to post anything, and comment on what you want, in one condition: "just use English", and don't worry at all about mistakes, we're here to learn.

**BacemRîbéry** Oh very good this is a good way to learn English. I love English too much as it's my favorite language and I'm so thankful to you Iman Thank you my friend

**Iman Faith** Most welcome & welcome here again

**Abu Mohammed** You are most welcome to this wonderful group

**Angel Parsa** Welcome here **BacemRîbéry** hope u will enjoy with lovely family of this group stay happy

**BacemRîbéry** Thank you Àngel "Abu

Another characteristic of this CoP is “engaged diversity” as the participants expressed their views on how members of this CoP represent different cultural backgrounds, levels and even ages which make this learning experience more interesting:

*“What makes this experience more interesting is the diversity of cultures, levels and ages (Iman)”*

As the participants come into daily contact and practice in this CoP, relationship building becomes inevitable for them. Almost most of the participants as members of this CoP reported that relationship building is an important component to their learning experience in this CoP. Such relationships are based on mutual trust, assistance and knowledge sharing. This evident from their responses as:

*“At first, we didn't know each other quite well, but day by day, we came to know each other better and so, we developed relationships based on trust and on helping and exchanging knowledge in a more comfortable way” (Tasnim)”*

Another feature characterizing this CoP is community maintenance as the participants articulated their concern about strengthening the participation of the EFL members of this CoP. This is what was stated by Tunisiano:

*“We should only keep re-enforcing them to accomplish the main goal of English learning”.*

Thus, based on the CoP theory, all these previous characteristics represent the EFL learners’ mutual engagement which is an essential component of this CoP.

#### *4.3 The shared repertoire of the CoP*

The findings also revealed that this CoP was described by the EFL learners as a supportive learning environment, in which they acquired knowledge in English and enhanced their English and especially in writing skill and social skills such as communication. This was reported by them as follows:

*“This contact helped us with time to acquire information and knowledge implicitly in English” (Iman)*

*“This community has enhanced my writing and helped me get better in one of the most challenging skill for me” (Zaina)*

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*“It offers a very good chance to strengthen our social skills and in communication (Salsabela)*

Moreover, within time, the members of the CoP realized that they this CoP was an asset based environment in which they felt comfortable and less stressed and develop their sense of autonomy in their learning and practice and sense of belonging to this CoP. All these characteristics were articulated by the participants respectively:

*“It has always motivated me to feel less stressed” (Zaina)*

*“Really, I don’t feel like I’m in a facebook group, but it’s like I’m within my friends and family. I do feel the sense of belonging” (Reham)*

## **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to describe and better understand the characteristics of a CoP as revealed by the 12 EFL learners through their learning experiences and participation in this CoP via FB. Overall, the findings revealed that the EFL participants reported a positive and successful learning experience while participating in the Only For English Learning CoP. Several sub-themes emerged which describe and provide a better understanding of the characteristics of this CoP and are consistent with Wenger’s (1998) three necessary dimensions for the existence of a CoP, yet unlike previous research on CoPs, the current study provides description of what a CoP looks like in the EFL learning context rather than teacher professional development. Therefore, these findings seem valuable particularly for EFL instructors and students. Moreover, the findings of the present study imply that utilizing newly emergent technologies for enhancing EFL learners’ English learning may not be well achieved without considering good pedagogical practices. This is because technologies are tools which can be turned into interactive learning environments by establishing good pedagogical practices. Therefore, one way of achieving this as evidenced by the findings of the current study is involving the EFL learners in a CoP via SNSs where they can practice English more effectively by establishing social contact, socializing and feeling committed to these activities and belonging to this learning environment. However, it would be more useful for future research to provide a description of a CoP among EFL learners based on their levels of membership as posited by the CoP theory (peripheral, active and central).

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