

BUILDING ACTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: REALITY AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *Over the past five years, the National Foreign Languages Project has made tremendous efforts to build and develop foreign language learning communities in the whole national education system. However, there remains a lack of active language learning communities (ALCs) outside classroom to offer exposure to students' English usage in real settings. This article provides a theoretical framework for building ALCs and examines the reality of building ALCs at higher education institutions, thereby offering solutions to the building of sustainable ALCs. The study employs both the quantitative method using a questionnaire-based survey and the qualitative approach utilizing observation and synthesis of primary and secondary sources. The findings suggest that building learning modes and seeking a feasible model of promoting students' learning motives have become the most important factors for the sustainable development of ALCs at tertiary education level.*

Keywords: *Communicative language teaching, communicative competence, learning community, active learning.*

1. Introduction

The context in which learning takes place makes a vital contribution to the success of learning; this is true in particular for language acquisition. Countries in which English is not a primary language often lack an authentic English environment as in-class instruction may be the only contact that students have with English [3; p.3]. In Vietnam, it took a long period of applying conventional language teaching and learning-Grammar-Translation Methods-with which a common Vietnamese was predominantly used in the classroom where the teachers explained the lessons, students attended the class, took notes, but few deliberately posed questions, or got engaged in discussion. In the same vein, due to sole reliance on classroom instruction, the teaching and learning of foreign languages were lack of out-of-class activities to offer exposure to practical use of languages [7]. As a result, students were flooded with grammatical items, structures, and vocabulary, but appeared poor at communicative competence.

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Realizing that it is of great importance to bring into full play the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to facilitate communication, education, and business with a view to gaining the country's economic competitiveness in the era of integration, the government launched "Comprehensive innovation in foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system during 2008-2020", referred to as Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg dated 30/9/2008. In late 2017, the government issued the Decision No. 2080 on the approval of adjustments and additions to the Project entitled "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2017-2025". In response to this new move, the National Foreign Languages Project (the NFL Project) has provided instructions and training for language educators and students at all academic institutions of the whole national education system to implement the building of foreign language learning communities. At the same time, language educators, teachers and practitioners discern that CLT is the appropriate method to be implemented at all education levels and that the building of foreign language learning communities is crucial to reinforce students' language learning towards communicative competence development [5]. This change both in awareness and action has, more or less, brought about a breakthrough for foreign language teaching and learning at institutions nationwide in recent years.

Against this background, there remain a variety of pitfalls and limitations which include misunderstandings surrounding the concept of learning community, practices among EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers and learners, and lacking modes of activities and management. How to address these problems and how to bring about the sustainable development of such communities remain the questions of particular concern, accordingly.

This article endeavors to answer the aforementioned questions. The first section gives an insight into the concept and principles of a language learning community. The second section discusses the reality of the building of ALCs for students. The third section examines learning modes and modules of learning activities, at the same time looking into a model of organizing and managing learning activities for the community sustainability.

2. Theoretical framework and methods

2.1. Theoretical framework

2.1.1. Concept and components of a foreign language learning community

A foreign language learning community has different interpretations and levels of implementation for different learners. Schmoker (2006) and Olivier & Hipp (2010) are convinced that learning communities (also implying to refer to foreign language learning communities) are based on the following four components-*membership, shared events and emotional connections, influence, and fulfillment of individuals' needs*. *Membership* can be a group of learners, all learners of a class or classes at a school, or can be inter-school learners in some locality, etc. *Shared events and emotional connections* mean participants in the learning community have common needs and preferences for learning and using language on a voluntary basis through shared activities and events in the learning community. *Influence* means the reciprocal influence between individuals in the learning community on building their learning styles and optimal learning strategies.

Through interaction and sharing, members of the community help each other and learn from each other, and through the shared activities and events learners will gradually form a positive learning attitude and motivation. *Fulfillment of individuals' needs* means learners' needs and interests in joining the activities of the learning community are met, ensuring that activities should be interesting, interactive, and effective in the process of individuals' language learning and practice.

2.1.2. Principles of a foreign language learning community

Blankstien (2010) suggests that there are six principles essential in school with a learning community:

Principle 1: Common mission, vision, values, and goals;

Principle 2: Ensuring achievement for all students;

Principle 3: Collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning;

Principle 4: Using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement;

Principle 5: Gaining active engagement from family and community; and

Principle 6: Building sustainable leadership capacity for community.

It is noteworthy that commitment to the learning of each student is the key in learning communities [4]. This notion parallels Blankstien's Principle two. To put it simply, language learning communities need to draw students' active engagement for the sake of communicative competence development; simultaneously students commit themselves to developing sustainable relationships among community members, fostering their learning autonomy, and together solving problems arising in the learning process. Principle four reflects the need for educators to use data to inform practice. Teachers needs to provide students with assistance in acquiring the necessary materials and approaches to accomplish the task goal, namely (1) learning contents in the community should be linked to the development of students' communicative competence; (2) select appropriate learning materials and activities as well as employ active learning methods to maximize those materials and activities; (3) learning materials and activities must involve diversifying contents and modes to gain expected learning outcomes, and (4) use media to enhance language interaction among students in the community. Principle six focuses on the leadership or management to ensure its sustainable development and spillover effects. Resources also serve as a critical part for the community, including budget to maintain activities, personnel stability, consistency in implementation direction and collaboration, among other things.

2.2. Methods

2.2.1. A mixed approach

In this study, the author adopted a combined research methodology of qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the building of ALCs at tertiary education level to enhance students' English communicative competence. Quantitatively, the author employed surveys designed in close-ended and open-ended questions distributed to higher education students to gather primary data, providing insights into their perspectives and experiences. These questionnaires were designed to elicit specific information related to students' reflections and experiences in the building of ALCs at their institution. Qualitatively, the

author employed observation as an educator, at the same time using primary sources including published materials such as books and articles to establish a theoretical framework and contextualize the findings. Furthermore, government reports were examined to understand official stances, policies, and initiatives relevant to the research topic. Likewise, documents from the Ministry of Education and Training, including legal regulations and directives in line with colleges and universities' annual reports, were analyzed to ascertain the official guidelines and frameworks and to gain practical insights.

2.2.2. Participants

The author conducted a survey with questionnaire instrument at three universities in Nghe An and Ha Tinh. The survey involves 530 students (300 from Vinh University and Nghe An University of Economics, and 230 from Ha Tinh University). The survey targeted non-English major students in their second and third year of study. These participants have gained fundamental language elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and basic communication skills in General English modules in the earlier years, and they may have been immersed in a number of beyond classroom English activities at their institution.

2.2.3. Questionnaires

The questionnaires are divided into four traits, centering on (1) out-of-class ALCs that exist at universities/colleges to develop their English language proficiency and how students are motivated and autonomous about the learning community, (2) types of activities that students participate in using English in the community and how often they engage in these activities, (3) how out-of-class language learning community helps develop their communicative competence, and (4) to what degree multimedia and group work influence out-of-class English language learning. These questionnaires are designed in alignment with the components of an ALC and its principles, with each trait made up of five sub-questions, totaling 20 questions. The first trait focuses on existence of ALCs, student engagement, motivational factors, learning autonomy, and perceived benefits. The second trait centers on activity variety, frequency of participation, activity preferences, barriers to participation, and impact of participation. The third trait is about language skill improvement, activities of real-life application, feedback mechanisms, learning style awareness, and self-assessment. The fourth trait is about the use of multimedia tools, their impact on learning, group work dynamics, engagement levels, and perceived effectiveness.

2.2.4. Data collection

To ensure that data collection complies with legal grounds, the author discussed the study with the administrators of non-English majored faculties of the three universities and received the permission to meet with academic staff in charge and to access students' lists and their contact information. The author provided a consent form for all the participants via email, which clearly stated the aim of the study and that only those who give consent to participate in this study are eligible, and the participation in this study is voluntary. All information collected would be strictly confidential and anonymized. The surveys were then circulated via email and administered electronically to ensure efficiency and anonymity to encourage honest responses after the time of two weeks in April 2023.

3. Results and Discussion

Regarding the first trait of questionnaires, 311 out of 530 (59%) students spell out that there is a lack of communication environment in English as the out-of-class language learning community is rarely held, serving a small group of students. In the same vein, the on-site ALCs are occasionally hosted by lecturers, with the support of a number of students serving as MCs (Master of Ceremonies) and event decorators. Consequently, students have little, if no, motivation to learn and use English outside the classroom. Rather, they learn English mainly in classroom, but in a reluctant manner to cope with lecturer's immediate requirements and to do tests, not for the sake of communicative competence. Interestingly, this claim is made by the majority of students (207). This reveals that the building of out-of-class ALCs at academic institutions has not been given the deserving status and that it has not helped foster students' learning autonomy. The findings highlight a significant gap in the existence and effectiveness of ALCs, which are crucial for motivational factors and autonomy, thereby enhancing students' English language proficiency. Also, the lack of regular and engaging ALCs contributes to a diminished sense of community among students, which is essential for language practice and development. As stated in the Decision 2080 by the Government, effective ALCs can significantly enhance student engagement by providing a supportive environment where learners can practice their language skills in real-life contexts. However, the current sporadic nature of these communities fails to meet students' needs for consistent interaction and practice [6].

Data on the second trait of questionnaires show that 228 out of 530 (43%) claimed that the typical form of out-of-class learning activities is English club, while 107 (22%) students answered "No" other forms of activity, and 86 (16%) students added several field trips annually, but with minimal exposure to English usage. The English club centers on some typical activities, namely games, quizzes, crosswords, story-telling/narrations, English songs, and oral competition, but all of which did not involve all participants except games, quizzes, and songs while the remaining activities were designed for only class representative players. Here 197 (37%) students answered "Yes" to their regular participation in the learning activities, but 73 (14%) claimed "No" and, interestingly, 36 of whom generally commented in the open-ended question that they were reluctant to join the activities as they had no choice but to join them (as a compulsory requirement). This reality spells out that there is an absence of diversification of contents and modes of learning activities as well as a shortage of interactive engagement and open exposure to language use by all participants as stated in the concept and principles of foreign language learning communities. This is one of the pitfalls that has caused low motivation and involvement of students in the ALCs today.

With regard to the third trait of questionnaires, 87 (16%) students reported they become more confident in using English as a result of their engagement in the learning community, while 236 (45%) said "Not confident" in communicative competence, 143 (27%) were in neutral position, and the rest left the answer blank. Notably, of the 236

students who stated “Not confident”, 148 (63%) left similar comments in the open-ended questions that it was too difficult to speak and listen in English communication when given a chance in the learning community, while 56 (11%) stated they were not given a chance as the language learning community was not available, and 62 (12%) stated they did not get help from EFL lecturers and friends. This indicates that the present status quo of building ALCs at tertiary education level to develop students' communicative competence varies, but all considered, the common striking problem here lies in the inefficiency in terms of contents, modes and frequency of activities to improve students' language proficiency, especially speaking and listening skills [6]. Also, it remains lack of EFL lecturers' facilitation and students' shared vision, and, more significantly, a model of monitoring and managing the community to keep it alive so that students can be provided with regular opportunities to engage, interact, and build up confidence in using the language naturally in real settings.

In terms of the fourth trait of questionnaires, a majority of students (79% or 417 students) answered that they got no access to multimedia-based language learning, while a small number of students (96 or 18%) stated “Yes”, but mainly through a university/college-created Facebook page where they could occasionally get links to learning materials and watch English learning clips; the rest left the answer blank. Regarding group-work, a large number of students (403 students, accounting for 76%) discerned “Yes” for the influence of group-work on the English language learning, but stated in the open-ended question that they were not frequently given a chance to work in group. This indicates that the infrequency of group-work stems from a lack of understanding of the learning community and modes of community learning activities. Likewise, there remains a shortage, if not absence, of multimedia-based ALCs. Let alone keeping an eye on students' appropriate usage of such multimedia, how to maximize the benefits for students' English learning via multimedia-based ALCs has become an indispensable trend in the present language teaching and learning context at home and abroad. However, the lack of access to these resources, as reported by 79% of students, suggests that educational institutions are not fully leveraging the potential of multimedia to support language acquisition. Also, the limited access to multimedia resources, primarily through a Facebook page, restricts students' opportunities to engage with varied content that could enhance their language skills, indicating a gap between the key solution as instructed in “promoting the application of information technology and enhance the IT conditions for teaching and learning foreign languages” [10; p.4]. This situation underscores the need for institutions to develop more robust multimedia-based ALCs that can provide comprehensive resources and facilitate collaborative learning experiences as the findings suggests that a majority of students recognize the positive influence of group work, but the infrequency of such activities indicates a missed opportunity for collaborative learning. Therefore, it is imperative for educational institutions to prioritize the establishment of multimedia-based ALCs that not only provide access to learning materials but also encourage collaborative group work, thereby fostering a more dynamic and engaging learning environment [6].

4. Solutions to the building of ALCs

Through the insight in the current status of building of ALCs at tertiary education level, it is crucial to address the existing pitfalls and weaknesses with a view to maximizing the benefits of out-of-class language learning communities to develop students' communicative competence. The systematic solutions therefore need to be taken into account, particularly a model of organizing and managing learning activities, along with its measure systems to promote students' motives to ensure the sustainable development of the learning community and modules of specific activities.

4.1. Model of English learning communities for students

In fact, there are existing variations of ALCs, depending on learners' access and their language proficiency, learning culture, attitudes, motivation, and learning methods. However, to develop those variations into feasible models to be widely applied and sustainable at universities and colleges in the present context of Vietnam's English teaching and learning, it is critically important to take into account the following components, including the building of an active language practice environment and the elaboration of learners' motives. A proposed model for the building of ALCs is presented in Diagram 1.

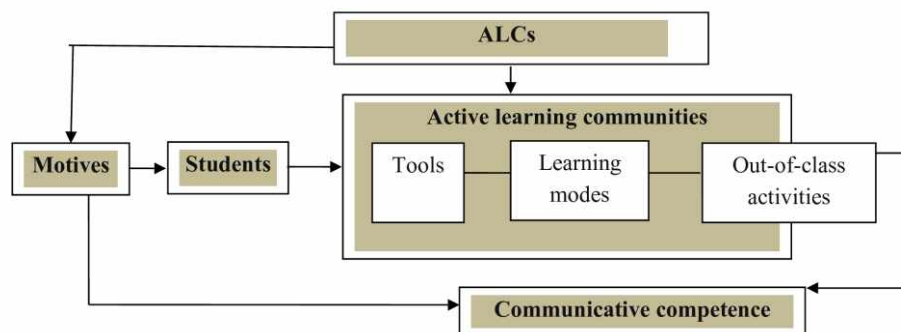


Diagram 1. Components of active learning communities

Motives: Students first need to be affected by a system of measures to promote their learning motives. Strategic solutions are impactful measures on the psychology of students, helping them overcome psychological barriers, fear, or shyness when learning and using English.

Students: Under the impulse of motives, students set the language learning styles and strategies, at the same time setting clear goals, making short-term and long-term plans for language learning, and embracing measures to achieve those goals, thereby proactively engaging in the language learning communities willingly and enthusiastically. This is a critical factor to change students' learning attitude.

Active learning communities: A combination of tools, learning modes and extracurricular activities.

Tools: include learning materials, textbooks, magazines, books, websites, social networking sites, boards, slogan, learning software, learning programs, and so on, with a view to helping students use English anytime and anywhere to meet a variety of different learning needs.

Learning modes: include organizational forms of learning, such as English clubs, English learning forums, and so on, with different purposes and methods. The learning modes need to be designed based on the objectives, specific programs, and modes of operation and maintenance of the language learning community. Students need to participate in the learning modes as this is the solution to the sustainability of a learning community model.

Out-of-class activities: include activities that are held periodically with diverse and attractive contents and serve as a useful playground for groups of students, classes, all students at a university or college or between institutions in order to promote language learning movement of students. Students as participants will be motivated by a highly interactive environment, thereby offering open exposure to English usage in real settings. Students' positive learning outcomes will reinforce their learning motives and help them increasingly accelerate the language learning needs.

4.2. Systematic solutions to developing students' motives of participation

Facts show that the ALCs, despite recent positive results, have not yet maximized their benefits primarily due to lacking systematic measures to enhance students' motives of engagement in the language learning community for the sake of their communicative competence. For this reason, apart from the components of the active language practice environment discussed previously, it needs to involve other factors to engage students in the ALCs, including policy, propaganda, consultation, and detailed solutions to create an active language practice environment. The systematic solutions are presented in Diagram 2 below:

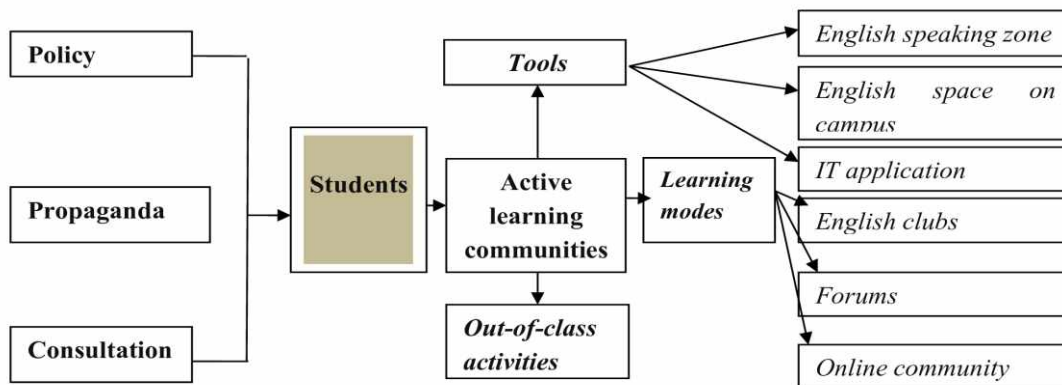


Diagram 2. Systematic solutions to developing students' motives

Policy: The policy to encourage students' participation in the ALCs may include: Financial support, human and material resources to sustain operations of the community activities which are supposed to be held weekly, monthly, quarterly/annually.

Policy to timely encourage groups and classes, both spiritually and materialistically, drawing their active participation in or/and organizing the ALCs activities.

Besides, it is necessary to take into account students' active engagement in the ALCs as one of the most important criteria for evaluating students' extracurricular activities performance and for awards.

Propaganda: promote the propaganda/regular announcement of ALCs activities or events through:

Information channels of each academic institution (website, bulletin, banners, slogans, flyer, etc.)

Social networking sites (Facebook, Fan page, etc.)

The “English corner” along lecture buildings, or elsewhere on campus.

Weekly meetings of Youth Union.

Consultation: Before participating in the learning community activities, students’ learning motives should be promoted by thematic consultations or orientations, such as identification of learning objectives and making language learning plan. The thematic consultations should be closely linked to students’ needs to use English, helping them to get proper awareness of the importance of learning English, to set out appropriate learning objectives, and to make plans for reaching the goals.

Active learning communities: As mentioned previously, active learning communities include tools, learning modes and out-of-class activities. Precisely, tools could be composed of an English-speaking zone, English space on campus and information technology applications.

English speaking zone: This serves as a venue for the learning community activities, clubs and group activities held periodically. This venue should be equipped with English learning materials (books, newspapers and magazines to entertain or provide scientific knowledge, life, literature, etc.). It also serves as news, movies space, conversation space, and connection & sharing space. It should also involve device installation including bookshelf, big screen TV connected to the Internet, audio system, movable tables and chairs, etc., depending on each institution’s conditions.

English space on campus: It is to create visual environment for students to get open exposure to using English anytime, anywhere. This can be done by presenting all table names, notes, and objects on campus in English. Also, the campus should present contents of educational philosophy, significance of English, or eye-catching slogans of English learning in English, etc., apart from the allocation of “English corners” on campus.

IT Application: Its primary purpose is to help students themselves share with one another, or to provide students with online learning resources, to connect shared needs among students in the language learning communities, to conduct activities, projects, and competitions, etc., with an ultimate goal of drawing more and more students’ attention and involvement as well as feedback-giving.

Learning modes: These involve various models of English clubs, forums—both direct (face-to-face forums) and online forums (online community), all of which are aimed at bringing into full play students’ shared interests and learning styles.

English clubs: English club models include English speaking club, movies club, English singing club, English learning experience-sharing club, “Life around Us”, storytelling, drama club (on the topic of studies, culture, tourism, entertainment, family, education, social issues, etc.), IT English Club (learning software, e-Learning systems, etc.). It is noteworthy that learning activities of the aforementioned club models should be interesting, interactive; simultaneously, students need to support each other, and the learning content selection and implementation need to involve appropriate methods.

Face-to-face forums: This mode serves as a positive and practical dialogue channel to help students get the appropriate learning methods and strategy as well as effective learning styles through exchange of experience from academia, experts, well-experienced English teachers or students in the community. The modes and content of the forum can be English learning orientation forum, English learning experience-sharing forum, Talk Show, and Free Talk, etc.

Out-of-class activities: This learning mode is the most significant to create a playground for students to practice the language and to develop connectivity as well as sustain the community development. Modules need to include Music games, Gala cover songs, English speaking contest, "New Year around the world", Ring the Golden Bell, "Miss Elegant Speaks English" contest, Exhibition of thematic newspapers and projects (on the major holidays of the year), Summer Camp (English summer camp, summer camp skills, and young intellectuals' summer camp), Exchanges between students of classes/between students of universities or colleges, or between students and those at English language centers or SOS village in localities, "Let's speak English" field trip, and modules of teambuilding, etc.

It is of an important note that out-of-class activities need to meet some criteria to ensure the efficiency and authenticity of the activities' modules, such as students' increasing involvement, diverse and popular topics, appropriate time and widespread propaganda, apart from contents of activities relevant to students' language levels as well as their needs and interests.

In addition to the proposed models, it is of great importance to engage all stakeholders with a view to organizing and managing the community learning activities for the sustainable development of the ALCs. As discussed previously, although activities of the ALCs are primarily decided and organized by students, it is impossible to lack institution leader's support and EFL lecturer' orientation and guidance for the community learning activities. Likewise, universities or colleges need to engage Youth Union and Student's Association and to establish a group of key students (host of the clubs and forums, the organizers of campus-based English space and of out-of-class activities) to develop students' motivation and learning attitudes.

5. Conclusion

In the age of the country's robust international integration, foreign languages in general and the English language in particular have become an indispensable means of communication. This significance has been fully realized by the government and all the educational stakeholders, especially the NFL Project, educational managers and teachers who have made great efforts to bring into full play the CLT in the classroom and beyond. However, there remains the inadequacy of language teaching and learning, especially the shortage of an active learning environment of the English language outside the classroom to offer maximal exposure to students' language usage even though the building of ALCs has been implemented over half a decade.

This article provides an insight in the concept and principles of learning community in the hope that educational stakeholders, especially EFL teachers, can grasp

full significance of such communities to gear towards students' communicative competence. It is also clear that developing learning methods and finding an effective model to enhance students' motivation have emerged as crucial elements for sustainable development of ALCs in higher education institutions. However, the spillover effects and sustainability of ALCs need to involve strong will, devotion and collaboration among educational managers, EFL teachers, and students themselves.

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