



An Empirical Study on the Construction of English Learning Communities Assisted by Smartphones

Haige Shi^a, Ping Zhang^{*}

School of Fundamental Education, Beijing Polytechnic, Beijing, China

^ashihaige@sina.com, ^{*}101323@bpi.edu.cn

Abstract. The establishment of a learning society that advocates lifelong learning for all citizens calls for the development of learning communities. The advancement of educational digitization has provided support in terms of resources and technology for the construction of learning communities. Smartphones, with their advantages as resource providers, environment creators and emotion supporter, contribute to the construction of English learning communities from multiple aspects. Based on this, a new circular framework is put forward to explain the functions the smartphones play. An empirical study on the practical implementation of construction of English learning communities assisted by smartphones was carried out. The survey results show that the learners are more likely to have better learning grades and higher English proficiency in English learning communities assisted by smartphones.

Keywords: English Learning Community (ELC); smartphones; resource provider; environment creator; emotion supporter

1 Introduction

The report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes the construction of a learning society and a great nation committed to lifelong education for all citizens. Guided by the concept of sustainable development and led by the philosophy of lifelong learning, the focus is on promoting the healthy and comprehensive development of individuals, providing quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone, and fostering modernization. This process involves a transition from "family person" to "social person," from "acquaintance" to "public individual," from "experienced person" to "knowledgeable person," and ultimately from "knowledgeable person" to "wise person." [1] The widespread application of smartphones in education, a hallmark of educational digitization, has provided technological assurance for the establishment of a learning society where "everyone learns, everywhere is a place to learn, and learning is possible at all times."

The blueprint for 21st-century schools is to establish learning communities that not only offer a space for learners to study and grow but also enable teachers, as educational experts, to achieve personal development. Furthermore, these

communities can serve as venues for parents and other stakeholders to support and participate in school reforms, fostering joint growth. The educational goal of learning communities is to transition from cognitive development to identity development. Learning is a mode of existence within our social reality, and the construction of learning communities requires a shift from cognitive development to the construction of learner identities, that is, from the identity of a learner to that of a learner. Sociality is an essential attribute of human beings, determining the need for communal living, interaction with others, and participation in various social practice activities.

Learning communities are composed of learners and facilitators (including teachers, experts, tutors, etc.) and are established based on the learners' intrinsic needs and shared aspirations and interests. These communities aim to complete common learning tasks and promote the growth of all members, emphasizing a reciprocal learning perspective during the learning process. Through interpersonal communication, exchange, and sharing of various learning resources, these communities facilitate mutual influence and promotion, forming a grassroots learning collective. [2] Compared to traditional teaching methods, the concept of learning communities places greater emphasis on harnessing group dynamics, effectively transforming the static and passive teaching model of "teacher talks, students listen," and empowering students to become the "masters of their own learning." Through interactions with peers and teachers within the community, learners collectively enter the realm of learning.

1.1 English Learning Communities: Concept and Characteristics

An English Learning Community (ELC) is a collective of learners, teachers, and other relevant individuals who share the common goal of learning English and enhance their linguistic abilities through communication, collaboration, and mutual assistance. It emphasizes interaction among learners and the construction of a supportive and collaborative learning environment. The primary characteristics include dialogue and listening, a harmonious and free atmosphere for learning, with group cooperative learning as the main method, fostering both teacher-student and student-student learning communities. Heterogeneity and symbiosis form the harmonious coexistence of the community, where learners not only improve their language skills but also gain positive emotional experiences in learning English.

The concept of a community dates back to 1887, introduced by German classical sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in his work "Community and Society: Fundamental Concepts of Pure Sociology." John Dewey, in his book "Democracy and Education," proposed a similar idea of learning communities. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines a community as "a group of people or entities that share a common history, characteristics, interests, and benefits." The term "learning community" first emerged in the 1990s. The concept of an English Learning Community has gradually evolved through practice in the fields of language learning and education. It is a Community of Practice (CoP), offering a new perspective on how individuals learn by participating in social collectives. According to Wenger (1998), a CoP is a "shared history of learning," where a group engages in joint activities and continuously

creates a shared identity through their participation and contributions to the community, characterized by three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. [3] Thus, "learning is essentially a social phenomenon, situated within our experiences and participations in the world." [4] Negotiation, heterogeneity, decontextualization, and interembedding are intrinsic features of a community. [5]

In summary, English Learning Communities possess the following characteristics: firstly, the uniformity of learning objectives, with shared goals and interests uniting members from diverse backgrounds through their common pursuit of English proficiency. Secondly, the cooperative nature of interpersonal relationships, with mutual support and resource-sharing through group discussions, peer teaching, and collaborative learning activities. Thirdly, the interactivity of the learning process, encouraging open and frequent communication, where members practice and enhance their English communication skills through dialogue, discussion, and other social activities. Lastly, the reflective nature of learning outcomes, where community members focus not only on the accumulation of language knowledge but also on reflecting on the learning process, continually improving learning strategy through self-assessment and peer feedback. These characteristics together form a dynamic, interactive learning environment, allowing learners to progress through practice and overcome challenges with the support of the community.

Learning communities originate from English classrooms but transcend the traditional classroom setting, shifting students from a "guest" to a "host" position. The differences between an English Learning Community and an English classroom are manifested in five aspects: firstly, the convergence of member objectives, with a shared vision of goals being the essence of the ELC. Secondly, a more diverse membership structure, where anyone interested in learning English can join the community regardless of age or proficiency. Thirdly, interactive communication is no longer limited by time and space, enabling real-time interaction both in and out of class. Fourthly, a broader range of knowledge, where learning content extends beyond textbooks to include a variety of extracurricular topics of interest. Fifthly, a positive and uplifting environment, where the soft environment constructed by member inquiries, group learning, and topic discussions fosters a focused and exploratory learning atmosphere, which form the drive force forward for the learners. An English Learning Community emphasizes communication and dialogue, creating an autonomous, cooperative, equal, and free learning environment that highlights student agency, cultivates a spirit of shared inquiry, promotes individual development, enriches students' language perception, and meets the needs of English learning. Twenty years ago, in Japan, reforms with the vision of "learning communities" were in full swing, with the principal of a middle school in Hiroshima, Takeshi Kitagawa, introducing "activity-based, cooperative, and expressive" learning in all classes to initiate the creation of a "learning community." [6]

1.2 Application of Smartphones: Technological Support

According to the 52nd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of June 2023, the scale of Chinese internet users reached 1.079 billion. The Chinese market has over 950 million smartphone users. The number of mobile internet users in China has surpassed that of traditional PC internet users, and the smartphone ownership rate among college students stands at 100%, laying a solid foundation for the establishment of mobile-based English Learning Communities.

Entering the 21st century, smartphones have become a necessity for young people, serving as highly integrated mobile communication devices with the advantages of multifunction integration, portability, efficient information processing, and social networking capabilities. Firstly, smartphones integrate various functions such as telephony, messaging, photography, recording, internet access, navigation, and entertainment, meeting the diverse needs of users in their work and daily lives. Their compact size makes them accessible anytime, anywhere, without the constraints of time or space. [7] Secondly, the smart operating systems of smartphones allow users to download and utilize a vast array of applications (Apps) covering aspects of life, work, learning, and entertainment. Smartphones provide rapid access to the internet, supplying users with up-to-date news, data, and knowledge. Additionally, smartphones support a variety of social networking applications, such as WeChat, facilitating communication and connection with others.

Educators in the smartphone era must act in accordance with the trends and guide the development of the times, studying the impact on various educational stakeholders. They should leverage smartphones as tools to promote English learning and achieve a digital transformation of teachers' information literacy in the smartphone era.

2 Theoretical Framework for the Construction of English Learning Communities with Smartphone Assistance

Both theoretically and practically, the above-mentioned advantages of smartphones meet the conditions necessary for the construction of English Learning Communities (ELCs) as demonstrated in the following.

2.1 Establishing English Learning Communities: Multiple Theoretical Foundations

The establishment of ELCs is supported by a broad and profound theoretical foundation, with multiple theories underpinning their creation, as shown in Fig.1.

Social Support and Empathy Theories

Social support theory, which began to gain attention in the 1970s and was further researched and developed in the 1980s and 1990s, posits that the emotional,

informational, service, and material support individuals receive from their social networks significantly impact their psychological health and ability to cope with learning pressures. This support can come from family, friends, colleagues, or community organizations. [8] Social support is viewed as a resource that helps individuals deal with life's challenges and pressures. In the process of establishing ELCs, social support theory emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive environment where positive interactions among students, teachers, and parents can provide the necessary support for learners to tackle learning challenges. By offering such support, learning communities can enhance students' psychological health and academic achievement.

Empathy theory focuses on how individuals understand and feel the emotional states of others. It considers empathy as a vital social skill crucial for establishing interpersonal relationships, promoting social interaction, and fostering a supportive environment. Empathy is typically divided into two primary dimensions: emotional empathy, which refers to an individual's resonance and feelings towards others' emotions, and cognitive empathy, which involves understanding others' emotions and viewpoints. [9] In the creation of learning communities, empathy theory helps establish a supportive and inclusive environment. By cultivating empathic abilities among members, learning communities can promote mutual understanding and support, enhancing cohesion. Empathy also facilitates effective communication and encourages member participation in activities aimed at achieving community goals.

Cooperative Learning and Sociocultural Theories

Cooperative learning theory emphasizes the interaction and collaboration among students in small groups to promote each other's learning. It posits that students work together in groups, enhancing learning outcomes through mutual help and support. Learning tasks are collectively undertaken by group members, with each member encouraged to actively participate. Cooperative learning allows students to develop social skills, teamwork abilities, and a sense of responsibility. It not only focuses on academic achievements but also values the development of non-cognitive skills, such as communication and problem-solving capabilities. Prominent figures in this field include the Johnson brothers (Roger Johnson and David Johnson) and Robert Slavin, the latter of whom proposed the "Student Teams-Achievement Division (STAD)" model. [10] In the construction of ELCs, teachers can design group cooperative learning activities, such as performing textbook dramas, creating job-seeking posters, and making thematic propaganda paintings. Learners must discuss roles and design ideas, rehearse language lines, and plan performance actions and color composition together. Through this "learning by doing" process, students not only acquire English language knowledge but also improve their cooperation and communication skills.



Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework of English Learning Community with Smartphone Assistance

Sociocultural theory posits that individuals experience and grow through interaction, emphasizing the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Initially proposed by Vygotsky in the 1930s, sociocultural theory introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), referring to tasks that individuals can accomplish with the help of others beyond what they can do independently. [11] Through social interaction, individuals internalize sociocultural experiences into their psychological functions. In creating learning communities, sociocultural theory highlights the importance of interaction and collaboration among community members for individual learning. As a sociocultural environment, learning communities enable members to collectively construct knowledge and skills through shared activities, discussions, and practices. Teachers and experienced members can provide scaffolding to help newcomers gradually develop their capabilities, while learners internalize social interaction into their cognitive abilities by participating in learning community activities. [12] Additionally, cultural tools and resources within learning communities, such as shared documents, discussion boards, and online courses, serve as important mediators for learning. In this way, learning communities not only support individual learning development but also foster social connections and cultural sharing among members.

Motivation and Incentive Theories

Motivation theory is concerned with how to stimulate and maintain an individual's behavior by satisfying their needs and motives. It involves the study of the driving factors of human behavior, aiming to understand how to improve individual work efficiency, learning motivation, and overall performance through motivational means. Notable motivation theories include Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's two-factor theory, and Vroom's expectancy theory. In the field of education, motivation

theory is used to enhance students' learning motivation and participation. For instance, teachers may use achievement motivation theory to design curricula and assessment systems, stimulating students' interest in learning by setting challenging goals and providing timely feedback. In classroom management, teachers may employ rewards and recognition to enhance students' self-efficacy, thereby improving their academic performance.

Motivational theory explores the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that drive individual behavior, explaining why individuals choose certain actions and how they maintain them. It includes concepts such as intrinsic motivation (actions driven by personal interest or a sense of satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (actions performed to receive rewards or avoid punishment). Additionally, motivational theory focuses on concepts like needs, goals, expectations, and self-regulation, and how they influence individual behavior and learning. In educational settings, motivational theory is used to design curricula and teaching strategies to increase student engagement. For example, teachers may offer optional assignments and projects, allowing students to learn according to their interests, thereby stimulating their intrinsic motivation. At the same time, teachers can use extrinsic rewards (such as grades, praise, likes, or prizes) to motivate students to complete learning tasks. In ELCs, providing a supportive environment encourages members to learn and communicate based on personal interests and goals, enhancing intrinsic motivation. Additionally, establishing recognition and reward mechanisms reinforces positive behaviors, enhancing extrinsic motivation, and thus promoting knowledge sharing and the sustained development of the learning community.

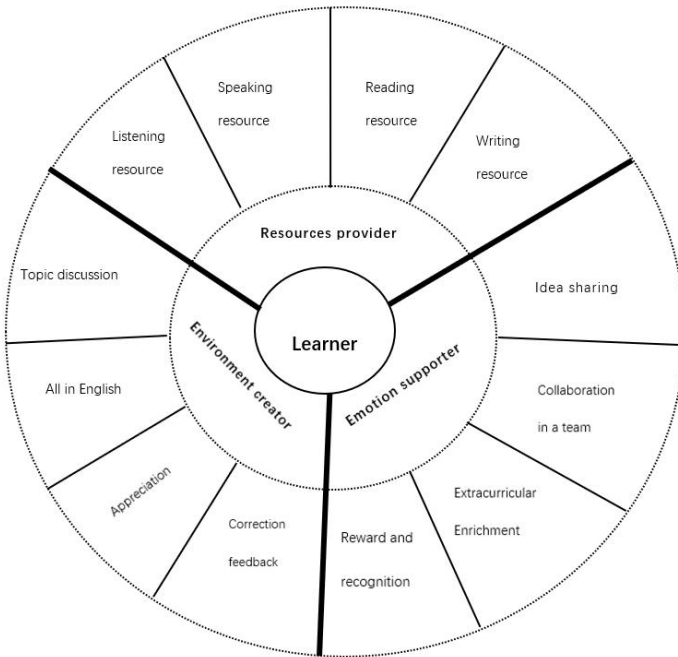


Fig. 2. The Roles of Smartphones in Constructing English Learning Communities

2.2 Constructing English Learning Communities: Practical Framework

On the practical level, smartphones play three pivotal roles in facilitating the construction of English Learning Communities. The first is resource supporter: Smartphones provide learners with resources for listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating through applications or in the form of audio, video, and text materials. For instance, apps like Jinshan Word King and Shanbei Words offer vocabulary lookup and memorization tools; resources from English BBC or VOA, Liulishuo, Hippo Read, KoKo English, Renjiao Point Read, and E English Treasure provide a wealth of listening and speaking learning materials. The second one is environment creator. [13] Smartphones assist in building a learning platform that integrates language, content, topics, and motivation, creating both the hard and soft environments needed by efficient learners. The Cambly App, developed by a technology education company in Silicon Valley, USA, allows learners to immediately communicate and interact with native English speakers online for oral training. The Liulishuo English app on smartphones not only offers a vast array of English learning materials and professional, efficient speaking practice courses but also features relaxed and flexible mini-games that allow learners to practice sentences, memorize words, and learn English within a game setting. Last but not least, it is emotion supporter, as shown in Fig. 2. As an online learning tool, platforms like Xuexitong provide not only a variety of learning resources but also rich interactive methods such as discussions, peer reviews, group cooperation, and teacher comments. Teachers and students can engage in one-on-one communication and exchange, and teachers can share viewpoints and insights with groups. This egalitarian atmosphere for English learning makes learners feel more at ease and relaxed, while also aiding both students and teachers in efficient learning and teaching. [14]

3 Empirical Study on the Construction of English Learning Communities Assisted by Smartphones

3.1 Implementation Case of Smartphone-Assisted English Learning Community Construction

A college in Beijing was selected for this study, where an English teacher attempted to construct an English Learning Community (ELC) in College English courses over the course of one academic year. Leveraging the advantages of smartphones, the construction was approached from three dimensions: Firstly, as a resource supporter, the teacher provided auditory resources, utilized Liulishuo for oral English resources, employed the U Campus platform, which is textbook-aligned, for reading materials, and utilized the iwrite writing system for writing resources. Secondly, capitalizing on the smartphone's role as an environmental supporter, the teacher downloaded the Xuexitong learning platform. The platform's forum was used to cultivate a topical atmosphere, with English-language posts creating an English-speaking environment and like and emoji reactions establishing an incentive atmosphere. Lastly, as an

emotional supporter, discussions were initiated in the Xuexitong discussion area, with Tencent Questionnaires used for sharing viewpoints on specific topics. The Zuowen Pigai Wang(Composition Correction Network) was employed for timely feedback, correction, and evaluation of compositions. Outstanding and innovative viewpoints posted by learners were rewarded and recognized, as illustrated in Fig. 3. The outermost circle represents the potential applications of smartphone use. Due to the prevalence of English learning apps with similar functionalities and limitations in table and text length, only one practical implementation case is presented here, without listing multiple practical possibilities.

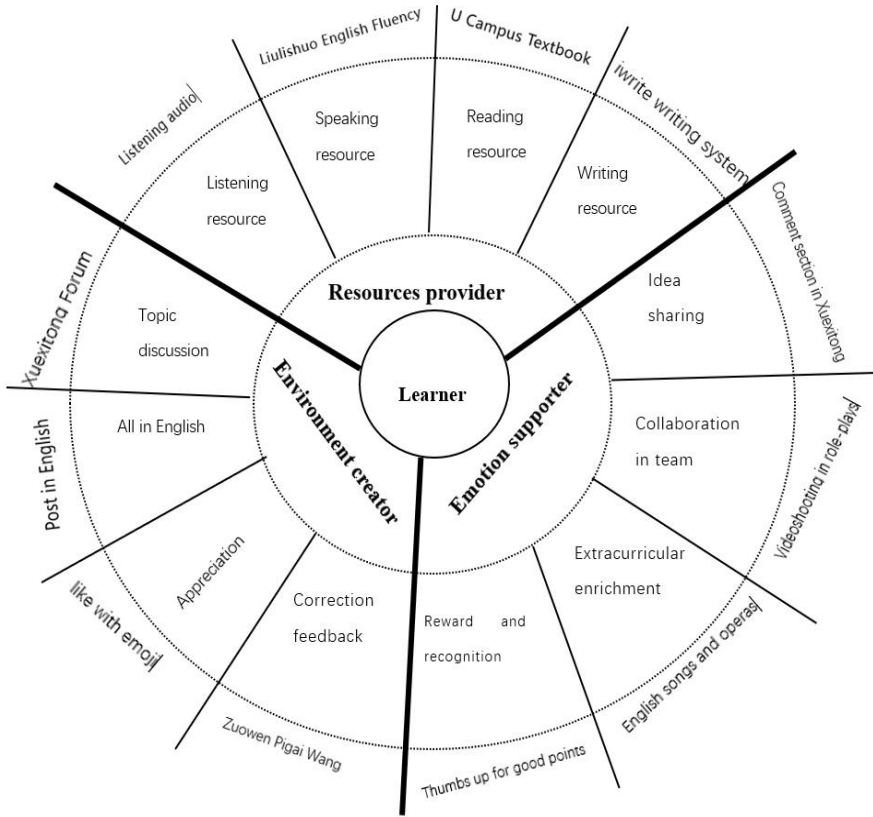


Fig. 3. An Implementation Case of Smartphone-Assisted Construction of English Learning Communities

3.2 Implementation Case of Smartphone-Assisted Construction of English Learning Communities

A case study was conducted in a university in Beijing, where an English teacher attempted to construct an English Learning Community in college English classes over the course of one year. Leveraging the advantages of smartphones, the

construction was approached from three dimensions: Firstly, as a resource supporter, the teacher provided auditory resources, utilized Liulishuo for oral English resources, employed the U Campus platform(textbook readings) for reading materials, and utilized the iwrite writing system for writing resources. Secondly, taking advantage of the smartphone as an environmental supporter, the teacher downloaded the Xuexitong learning platform, used its forum to create a topical atmosphere, fostered an English environment by posting in English, and established an incentive atmosphere through the use of like and emoji reactions. Lastly, as an emotional supporter, discussions were held in the Xuexitong discussion area, viewpoints on specific topics were shared through Tencent Questionnaires, and Zuowen Pigai Wang (Essay Correction Network) was used for timely feedback, correction, and evaluation of compositions. Rewards and recognition were given to learners who posted excellent and innovative viewpoints, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The outermost circle represents the potential applications of smartphone use. Due to the multitude of English learning apps with similar functionalities and limitations in table and text length, only one practical implementation case is presented here, without listing multiple possibilities for practice.

3.3 Survey Description

To investigate the impact of smartphones on learners' English learning within the context of constructing an English Learning Community, the author conducted a survey study. The research subjects were 126 first-year students from three majors—Computer Science, Electronic Information, and Big Data—at a university's College of Telecommunications in Beijing. The students had similar entrance scores and had all joined the English Learning Community through smartphones during their first year of college English classes. The time span covered two semesters, from September 2022 to June 2023. In June 2023, a survey questionnaire regarding the impact of smartphones on their English learning was distributed to these students. A total of 126 questionnaires were issued, and 125 were returned, with one unreturned due to a student's sick leave. All 125 returned questionnaires were found to be valid and filled out correctly.

3.4 Survey Results

The survey questionnaire comprised 15 questions across three dimensions: Resource Supporter, Environmental Supporter, and Emotional Supporter. For each dimension, five specific questions were asked, with students choosing from four options: A - Strongly Agree, B - Agree, C - Disagree, D - Strongly Disagree. A total of 125 survey forms were returned, and the statistical results are presented in Table 1.

The results of the survey would be analyzed to determine the extent to which students perceive the support provided by smartphones in each of the three dimensions. The data would reveal whether students find the resources, environment, and emotional support offered by smartphones to be beneficial to their English learning experience.

Table 1. Survey Questionnaire on the Role of Smartphones in Constructing English Learning Communities

No.	Smartphone Role Description	In what way smartphones assist me in details	Strongly Agree (A)		Agree (B)		Disagree (C)		Strongly Disagree (D)	
1	Resources Provider	I frequently use apps on my phone to study English courses, such as Xuexitong, Liulishuo, etc.	124	99%	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%
2		Key vocabulary explanations and text analysis in English textbooks are conveniently available on the U Campus APP.	122	98%	2	2%	1	1%	0	0%
3		My high scores in listening are due to regular English listening practice on my phone, which has many listening resources.	105	84%	10	8%	8	6%	2	2%
4		I often use my phone to learn English by watching British movies and American TV series, and listening to English songs.	89	71%	25	20%	6	5%	5	4%
5		There are ample reading and spoken English dialogue audio and recording resources available on my phone.	112	90%	10	8%	3	2%	0	0%
6	Environment Creator	Teachers and students ask and answer questions in English, creating an English-speaking atmosphere, and I naturally communicate in English as well.	87	70%	22	18%	9	7%	7	5%
7		I often use apps on my phone such as Jinshan Word King and Shanbay Words for English vocabulary lookup, and Youdao Translation APP for translating complex sentences, which are very helpful.	115	92%	8	6%	2	2%	0	0%
8		It is convenient for students to upload photos or English compositions to the Xuexitong APP for homework assignments.	121	97%	4	3%	0	0%	0	0%

9		Oral reading software from FiF Speaking English or Liulishuo is very user-friendly; it automatically provides voice scores after reading English sentences and words, and I feel a sense of achievement as my scores improve with practice.	110	88%	9	7%	6	5%	0	0%
10		I particularly enjoy writing English compositions on apps like iwrite or Composition Correction Network, which provide immediate feedback and revision suggestions, allowing for quick progress.	99	79%	13	10%	12	10%	1	1%
11	Emotion Supporter	Through WeChat or QQ learning groups on my phone, I can communicate with teachers at any time, which feels reassuring and convenient.	98	78%	17	14%	9	7%	1	1%
12		Posting topics for discussion in unit discussion areas or forums and expressing my views and opinions in English is very satisfying.	99	79%	23	18%	2	2%	1	1%
13		The strong English learning atmosphere created by my phone encourages me to fully invest in English learning voluntarily and proactively.	111	89%	10	8%	4	3%	0	0%
14		With more English communication on phone forums, I naturally become accustomed to expressing emotions and ideas in English.	106	85%	9	7%	5	4%	5	4%
15		The encouragement from classmates and likes from teachers in the English learning community make me feel interested and accomplished in learning English.	102	81%	14	11%	7	6%	2	2%

Empirical studies have confirmed that the level of knowledge possessed by teachers has a significant positive impact on students' academic achievements. This suggests that the effective use of smartphones as a tool for English Learning

Communities could potentially enhance students' learning outcomes by providing them with access to a wealth of learning resources, creating a conducive learning environment, and offering emotional support that fosters a sense of community and engagement in the learning process.

4 Conclusion

The smartphone, integrating multiple functions, plays a significant role in the construction of English Learning Communities (ELCs). It has largely transformed traditional learning methods. Traditional classroom learning typically features four characteristics: face-to-face communication, centralized information dissemination, fixed learning times and spaces, and limited resource access. [15] In contrast, the modern digital age has seen smartphones profoundly impact learning within ELCs, reflected in instant communication and online socializing, personalized learning paths, dispersed learning environments, and increased online interaction and exchange. The philosophy of publicness, openness, and democracy embodied in the "Learning Community".[16]

Overall, the construction of ELCs assisted by smartphones is beneficial for promoting learners' English language acquisition. Smartphones, acting as resource supporters, environmental supporters, and emotional supporters, create a rich array of learning resources, a personalized supportive learning environment, and cooperative interpersonal relationships. Despite some disadvantages, such as fragmented time usage and the potential for addiction to short videos and games, teachers in the smartphone era need to rediscover the educational value of mobile devices. They should fully leverage smartphones to create ELCs, fostering a learning environment, an English-speaking atmosphere, and close emotional connections to help learners learn, master, and effectively use English. This enables them to communicate freely and naturally in English, becoming modern individuals with a sense of national pride and a global perspective.

In summary, while smartphones bring convenience to education, they also present challenges. Educators need to strike a balance, making full use of the advantages of smartphones while managing potential negative impacts to facilitate effective learning and teaching.

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