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Fostering academic literacy in English for Academic Purposes students through online academic Communities of Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative study reviews existing literature on fostering EAP students' academic literacy using online academic Communities of Practice (CoPs). While many studies have explored the benefits and drawbacks of using CoPs in Higher Education, few have explored how online academic CoPs can assist international students enrolled on EAP programmes to achieve the requisite academic skills to succeed in their studies while mastering both digital and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Thus, this study aims to investigate how CoPs and learning networks can facilitate the development of transferable academic skills of relevance in the digital era in EAP students.

The findings suggest CoPs may prove useful in the EAP classroom as a platform from which students can practise and develop digital literacy skills for their academic benefit. The rapid adoption of technology in academia and daily life is increasingly engaging students in bigger and more diverse online academic communities, enabling them to develop the necessary skill sets to navigate the digital landscape.

1. Introduction

In the realm of EAP, in which academic English and critical academic skills are paramount, the digital revolution and the push towards global connectivity represent both challenges and opportunities for international students. This study explores how online academic Communities of Practice (CoPs) can become pivotal platforms for these students, enabling them to not only master academic English, but also to acquire essential digital and intercultural competencies to ensure they thrive in contemporary global academic environments. By investigating the intersection of EAP, digital literacy, and ICC within Online CoPs (OCoPs), this study aims to reveal how CoPs and learning networks can assist EAP students in acquiring applicable and pertinent digitally related academic skills.

In my EAP classroom, I teach academic English and skills to support international students throughout their academic studies. I support my students by enabling them to develop their core academic skills, so they can “communicate and participate effectively in HE” (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 5); e.g. participate in seminars and lectures, social and academic events, produce various academic texts, and communicate with other students and members of staff.

EAP is “focused on the processing and creation of language as it is used in academic contexts” (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 5). The pedagogical outcomes in EAP focus on activities that can help students participate effectively by encouraging them to develop contextually relevant academic competencies, e.g. discourse and communicative competence (Hyland & Shaw, 2016; Bhatia, 2004). However, the increased use of technologies in learning and teaching, and the use of the internet to communicate and share ideas and resources with a wider community, along with the drive towards globalization, means that students may need to expand their range of skills to better engage in academic activities and enhance their academic competencies. Indeed, they may need to develop appropriate digital skills and ICC to succeed academically (Corbett, 2010; Compiegne, 2021) and in their future careers (Young et al., 2013).

My EAP classes are often diverse, which I use as an advantage when planning my lessons and designing classroom activities. For example, in speaking activities I put students in mixed nationality groups to give them opportunities to

interact with students from different cultures. I also incorporate various technologies into my classroom to provide students with opportunities to engage in online discussions and exchanges via available platforms such as Moodle and Zoom. However, participating in such activities may not be sufficient to fully develop their academic literacy in a more globalized sense. This is because classroom tasks are more controlled and students often follow the instructions given by their teacher, only communicating with those known to them, such as their classmates, meaning they are less exposed to the outside world, and acquire different levels of knowledge or language proficiency. I believe that participating in OCoPs may provide them with additional opportunities to develop their academic literacy by engaging in less controlled discussions, and interacting with bigger groups sharing similar interests.

As an EAP teacher, I am interested to learn how CoPs and learning networks might assist EAP students’ development of transferable and relevant academic skills, including their digital literacy. Therefore, this study will investigate how online platforms or spaces (e.g. forums, blogs, discussion groups, networking sites) can be integrated into the EAP classroom, and whether such spaces can help students develop digital literacy, as an important component of transliteracy. It will also explore students’ own requirements regarding developing digital literacy, including how they can achieve it by interacting with online environments; thus, aspects such as critical thinking, collaboration, digital citizenship, and ICC will be discussed.

EAP students are drawn from diverse cultural backgrounds and languages, therefore, their cultural, social, language and digital experiences vary. This can influence the way they communicate within their communities, contributing to how people communicate globally and shaping our idea of global citizenship. Thus, this study will also explore aspects of transliteracy, specifically, digital, translingual and transcultural literacy. I will then present my theoretical framework on the use of CoPs to examine the EAP implications of online and academic literacies. This will be followed by methodological arrangements for a narrative literature review of relevant studies selected for this project, and the discussion will position these findings in the context of Communities of Practice in EAP, Online Academic Literacies in EAP and Digital Literacies. To conclude the paper, I will summarize my conclusions, revisit the core argument and identify future research opportunities.

This inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How can OCoPs be used in the EAP classroom?

RQ2: To what extent can engaging in academic CoPs help EAP students develop their academic literacy?

RQ3: What constitutes digital literacy in contemporary academia?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Community of Practice

As described by Wegner and Wegner (2015, n.p.), CoPs are “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour”. In their work, they emphasize three components that define CoPs: domain, community, and practice, and assert that, for the community to grow, these three elements need to be developed simultaneously. Similarly, in a study of OCoPs for teachers’ reflective practice, Kirschner and Kwok-Wing (2007, p. 128) viewed CoPs as places where members who share a similar interest can engage in collective learning:

Where a process of social learning occurs between people with a common interest in a subject or problem who collaborate over longer periods of time to share and exchange ideas, find solutions and build knowledge.

In their study, the authors indicate that although interactions among CoPs were previously confined to face-to-face settings, due to the rapid increase of globalization and worldwide access to the Internet, CoPs are increasingly viewed as something virtual. Thus, some CoPs may also be considered or classified as Virtual CoPs (VCoPs). However, such classification is somewhat inaccurate, as demonstrated by Dube et al. (2006, p. 70), whose study conducted an extensive review of the literature and investigated 18 VCoPs. They claimed that although CoPs and VCoPs are often seen as “one-dimensional constructs”, the results of their study revealed that “while they may share some common features, their various structuring characteristics, such as enrolment and geographic dispersion, make them unique” (ibid.). Additionally, Dube et al. (2006) believe that because of how VCoPs members interact through the media they use and their reliance on ICT, their experiences differ from individuals who interact through CoPs. Thus, it seems more appropriate to reclassify VCoPs as OCoPs.

2.2 Academic online communities

Academic online CoPs may involve either groups of students, researchers or teachers, and can also take the form of partnership(s) between different groups or universities. According to Jarvis et al. (2016, n.p.), “Learning Communities involve people learning together in groups and socially constructing knowledge. Partnership involves people with different roles and expertise working together for mutual benefit”.

In terms of working in global online EAP communities, students may not only encounter linguistic challenges but also others such as e.g. cultural differences between the participants. In terms of language differences, although EAP students are accustomed to using English as the language of instruction and communication, using their second language to communicate globally may prove difficult. However, doing so may also provide them with opportunities to expand their language, develop transliteracy skills, and participate in authentic as opposed to ‘staged’ classroom exchanges. Transliteracy, as defined by Thomas et al. (2017, n.p.), describes “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks”. You’s (2016) study of Global or what he terms Cosmopolitan English and Transliteracy, examines several areas of writing affected by globalization, and he argues that linguistic and cultural differences can uncover human connections that would otherwise be restricted by geographical distance and cultural boundaries.

2.3 Academic literacies

The term Academic Literacies is most commonly associated with the academic skills of ‘home’ students in a traditional sense, as opposed to ‘non-traditional’ students (Wingate & Tribbel, 2011, p. 484) whose English is not their first language. However, as Thesen and van Pletzen (2006) observe, in academia, all students regardless of their first language are ‘novices’ when facing discipline-related academic discourse.

However, the terms EAP and Academic Literacies, as pointed to by Li (2020) in his literature review of EAP and EAP teachers, have often been used interchangeably, despite some researchers perceiving the terms as separate concepts, possibly due to their different backgrounds and viewpoints. For example, Wingate and Tribble (2012) and Lillis and Scott (2007) employ the term EAP to describe a practice of learning or teaching, and use academic literacies when referring to texts. However, Li (2022, p. 20), when reviewing

contemporary academic literacy research development, argues such development encompasses skills in an “object-oriented” [way] to serve for real knowledge production and communicative needs”.

As Li (2020) concludes, the definition of EAP is constantly evolving in scope. As an EAP practitioner, I am more familiar with, and thus more inclined to prefer Gillet’s (2004, p. 11) general definition of EAP, which “refers to the language and associated skills that students need to undertake study in higher education through the medium of English”. I then consider academic literacy to denote the skills EAP students need to acquire (Wingate & Tribbel, 2011) to develop their capacity to access and succeed on their programmes, as well as within their academic and/or professional communities (Li, 2022).

2.4 Digital literacies

To define literacy, Bélisle’s (2006) model describes the evolution of literacy concepts according to three models: functional, socio-cultural and transformational. The functional model conceives of literacy as a set of practical skills, e.g. writing, speaking, speaking and listening, which are needed to function within a society that in modern times may be translated to acquire the necessary IT skills to communicate online. The sociocultural practice model requires access to cultural, economic and political structures of society if it is to be meaningful. Finally, the transformational model requires cognitive tools to enable transformative human thinking, e.g. new ways of seeing and thinking about the world.

Meanwhile, digital literacy has been defined by Iskandar et al. (2022, p. 75) as “a critical element of multiliteracy framework required to thrive in the digital era and perceived as cross-curricular competencies”. However, digital literacy in a classroom setting, according to Buckingham (2010), differs, as it extends beyond merely integrating technology into a lesson to encompass mentoring students on how to use digital tools, creating and providing appropriate online learning environments, and helping students understand both cultural forms inside and outside the classroom.

However, reflecting on the increased use of digital tools and the internet in academia in recent year, Walker (2014, p. 581) notes that “digital technologies are becoming part of the way that people communicate and part of the context in which language is used”. Additionally, Li (2020) points out EAP learning and pedagogy have been influenced by this new digital trend. Moreover, the way language is now used

and ideas communicated using the available technologies (e.g. via online platforms, e-portfolios, online resources, PowerPoint, and videos) means that students are expected to not only develop skills to produce text per se, but also to be able to produce online and visual materials (Li, 2020). As Hyland and Hamp-Lyon (2002, p. 8) emphasize “the ability to produce and understand text-visual interrelations is now an essential component of an academic literacy, and the EAP research is to understand and detail these meanings”, has implications not only for the students who need to develop the new digital literacy skills but also for teachers. It is imperative that teachers develop their technical skills (Walker, 2014) to enable their students to study and thrive in online environments (Li, 2020). For example, Walker and Patel (2018, p. 98) argue that “approaches to digital literacies should shift their focus from skills and capabilities to digital practices” as the authors perceive digital literacies as social practices thus closely connected with the identity, power and authority of all involved” (ibid.).

The Findings section introduces additional studies that analyse different ways of perceiving digital literacy in academia in the contemporary climate, particularly in reference to EAP.

3. Methodology

This section sets out the research methods adopted in this study. In this section, I describe the method used and explain the data obtained. I then explain the data analysis procedure.

3.1 Method

To conduct this study, I selected a narrative interpretive literature review method to summarize previous studies and synthesize work in this area, to achieve a better understanding of the phenomena and different viewpoints, and identify the gaps in this research area (Weed, 2005). Unlike positivism, interpretivism “argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people’s experiences and their understanding of them” (Gemma, 2018, p. 8). Taking an interpretive approach, I offer my own insights (Hartley, 2008, p. 88) into how and whether these online environments help students to develop both academic literacy and digital transferable skills. Thus, in this study, the way the data was collected, analysed and interpreted is influenced and shaped by my understanding of the observed phenomena as informed by my own teaching and scholarly experiences.

When deciding on the method I considered limitations such as timeframe, workload and accessibility. This study was conducted by one researcher and needed to be completed within a very short timeframe (approximately 4 weeks) with limited access to resources. Unlike a critical literature review, a narrative review need not involve extensive research or critical evaluation of sources, meaning it can be completed by a single reviewer within 1-4 weeks and can still “cover a wide range of subjects at various levels of completeness and comprehensiveness” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 94). However, as Brennan et al. (2020) point out, the level of comprehensiveness may depend on the writer and the method employed, as a high level of bias is likely.

Nevertheless, the narrative approach I chose was the most convenient, as it allowed me to be selective when searching for evidence and expressing my position regarding the topic (Hartley, 2008). By selecting the narrative interpretive literature review as the methodological approach, I aimed to synthesize existing studies within a coherent narrative, offering a nuanced understanding of the role of OCoPs in EAP. This interpretive lens allowed me to not only summarize the existing literature, but also to imbue it with understandings derived from my personal professional experience and pedagogical perspective. Acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of this approach, I strive to balance it with a rigorous analysis of the selected studies, thereby providing a comprehensive overview to underpin subsequent findings and discussions.

3.2 Selection criteria

To identify the most relevant and up-to-date academic literature on the topic, I employed a systematic search strategy using Google Scholar. This platform was chosen for its comprehensive coverage of both open-access and subscription-based publications. To ensure access to a wide range of material, I drew on my affiliations with Lancaster University and the University of Glasgow, which provided me with access to restricted publications.

The search strategy was designed to yield precise results. I initially set the publication filter to include works published between 2000 and 2022, ensuring the data would be up to date and relevant. The keywords were meticulously chosen to align closely with the specific research themes:

1. “OCoPs in EAP”
2. “Online Academic Communities in EAP”
3. “CoPs and Academic Literacy”
4. “Digital Literacies in EAP”

These keywords were chosen to refine the search further after an initial broad search yielded over 1,000 results for each query, demonstrating the high level of interest and extensive body of literature available on these topics. The strategy of using specific phrases rather than single words effectively reduced the volume of less relevant results and increased the specificity and applicability of the studies to answer the research questions.

This targeted approach to the selection of sources ensured the reviewed literature was not only extensive but also directly pertinent to the research scope, addressing the nuances of the topic.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

As previously outlined, the initial data collection via Google Scholar and online university libraries sought to identify the most relevant sources using specific keywords. To refine this pool of sources, a second, more focused search was conducted subsequently.

Providing more specific information during the second search resulted in a significantly lower number of results for each of the keywords searched, e.g. 1) generated 6 articles, 2) 13, 3) 4 and 4) 10. Of the 33 sources identified, 25 were excluded, of which 13 were not related to the topic, focus or purpose of the study, 3 were duplications, 5 were not of academic value or written in the desired format, e.g. a podcast, a dissertation, a book review, or in a foreign language, and 4 were not accessible or required a subscription. As a result, 8 sources were selected for this review.

The initial stage involved reading the abstracts to determine the relevance of the source. Then the selected sources were skimmed and scanned and the findings summarized. Where necessary, a full review was conducted to obtain additional details.

4. Findings

4.1 Developing academic language and skills through social platforms and CoPs

The most recent of the studies selected was conducted by Rajendram and Shi (2022, p. 1), and involved 23 Post Graduate EAP students studying at a Canadian university. The researchers examined the students’ participation in CoPs, supporting them in developing essential academic language and literacy skills for their programmes. The student participants were asked to choose the area of EAP

they wanted to develop using learning strategies of their choice. They then worked collaboratively in groups giving each other feedback and support over a 3-month period. The results of the study suggest the CoPs enabled the students to develop their academic English by providing a platform from which to practice giving and receiving constructive feedback, as well as a 'supportive space' to develop their social skills in academia. All these skills are vital in EAP. However, as the data were collected after the study finished the correlation between the data gathered from face-to-face and online meetings and the time the students spent collaborating in their groups and the gains from their participation remains unknown. Moreover, although the teachers made the students aware of the importance of using a variety of English and translanguaging (García & Li Wei, 2014), ideologies such as monolingualism and native-speakerism were apparent in some contributions, e.g. their peer-feedback.

A previous study, conducted by Dashtestani (2018), examines how engaging EAP students in collaborative projects over four months via different networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and ResearchGate can impact students' attitudes towards EAP and academic content learning. A total of 173 students participated in the study, drawn from three disciplines: engineering (54 students), social sciences (57 students), and basic sciences (62 students). The research methods included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The students were engaged in collaborative projects for four months. Three EAP teachers contributed to briefing sessions designed to understand the study's objectives and motivate students to engage in the project using Social Network Sites (SNSs). The students were introduced to three SNSs at the start of the semester, and created academic profiles grouped together collaboratively to work on selected academic topics. The project comprised part of the students' coursework assessment, integrating the practicalities of SNSs with academic learning. The authors reported using social sites, noting benefits such as opportunities to communicate globally, expanding their vocabulary range, collaborating with peers and improving their academic English and literacy. However, the study also revealed the students preferred to work on Facebook over the two other sites, which may have been a consequence of their familiarity with Facebook and its features, specifically the option to chat online with other participants and teachers.

The study conducted by Asoodar et al. (2014) engaged 42 undergraduate students studying IT programmes at an Iranian University in a weblog writing class aimed at investigating whether blogs used in large English language

classes help students enhance their perceptions of learning. The findings (based on interviews, questionnaires and observations) revealed those students with a higher sense of community performed significantly better in class and scored more highly. Based on these findings, the authors (ibid., p. 291) proposed creating an assessment framework to incorporate "constructivist and social-interactionist theories of learning in order to treat students as members of a community of learning".

4.2 Academic digital literacy skills and practices

To address the development of academic digital literacy skills on online EAP courses, Asadnia and Atai conducted a study in 2022 at a University in Iran. The researchers examined the effectiveness of such courses as a way to develop the virtual presentation skills required from university research students. The findings from this qualitative study showed that among many benefits, the online experience helped the researchers to restore their "digital academic competence and collaborative community-based learning, awareness of audiences' affective engagement, and increasing attention to communicative language choices in this course" (p. 10). However, as Asadnia and Atai (2022) indicate, even though the online course allowed participants to create a small community of learning to become digitally competent in academia, they also needed to engage globally with an international community of researchers which to enable them to engage in real exchanges, create academic networks and improve vital academic skills.

Another study in the same year (Budianto et al., 2022) involved 150 English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students and 18 ESP teachers from a medical department at an Indonesian university. This aimed to reveal the differences in views, types of tools and platforms used, as well as digital literacy practices and challenges from participants' perspectives. ESP is a specific type of EAP course designed for students who need to develop their academic English within a particular subject area (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Liu & Hu, 2021; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Their findings reveal that implementing certain activities and digital tools in a course, such as video presentations and recorded projects, online group work, and online discussions via Zoom allowed for the successful promotion of digital literacy in the ESP classroom. The researchers believe that successful implementation of digital literacy in the ESP classroom extends beyond learning and teaching with technology to promote students' subject-related competencies and their skills using the language with technology.

Similarly, work carried out by Iskandar et al. (2022, p. 75) in Indonesia, looked at 55 English language course outlines from various English language university programmes to explore “the traits of the authentic academic digital practices in the course outlines of English language skills conducive for digital literacy development” and examine the extent to which digital literacy is integrated into the digital practices in the English language classroom. They found that digital literacy as ‘cross-curricular competence’ does not significantly permeate the outlines of such courses. The researchers further assert that these digital academic products are exclusively used for subject-specific academic skills, noting that digital literacy, which is ‘subject-transcending as cross-curricular competence’ is disregarded.

Interestingly, Dashtestani (2019), in a study of the use and acceptance of technology in EAP courses involving 87 EAP instructors at Iranian universities, reveals the potential of modern technologies to create international CoPs for EAP students, as joining such communities may appeal to their specific academic needs. Among many benefits they highlighted the opportunity to use authentic EAP resources, e.g. scientific research papers, and learning about different academic conventions and norms followed by different academic communities and adapting to such norms.

The above papers suggest considerable scope for further exploration and discussion of these areas and affordances among EAP practitioners.

4.3 Online academic communities and intercultural communication competence

With regard to ICC, a study conducted by Young et al. (2013) explored how international students who come to the UK to study adjust, and the particular factors that enable or impede their success. The study involved 108 international students studying courses in the UK and reveals that:

Multicultural teamworking is likely to be a considerable transferable skill for graduates, contributing, on the evidence of this study, to their academic success. It is also highly likely to be applicable to people’s future professional lives in a globalising world where international and intercultural contacts are of increasing salience. (p. 167)

Conducted over a decade ago, the above study predicted future trends would be towards a more globalised world, and thus emphasized the importance of intercultural skills as intrinsic to both professional and academic life. Considering the increasing use of digital tools in such global exchanges, ICC today is clearly technology dependent.

5. Discussion

5.1 RQ1: How can OCoPs be used in the EAP classroom?

The findings from the studies exploring the use of OCoPs in EAP (Dashtestani, 2018; Rajendram & Shi, 2022) show CoPs can be used in EAP classrooms in many ways and for various purposes. For example, CoPs can be used not only as spaces to develop and practice core academic skills (Gillet’s, 2004; Wingate & Tribbel, 2011) but also as platforms to develop skills in social interaction and ensure the level of engagement required in academia (Li, 2022).

Furthermore, as revealed by Dashtestani (2018), using familiar or less familiar social platforms, students can work collaboratively on specific academic projects. This may also allow them to not only develop their functional and practical skills such as academic and digital literacy by working on the content via digital tools, but also socio-cultural and transformational skills (Bélisle’s, 2006). This occurs through access to academic societies and the interaction with others who represent different cultures, values and ways of thinking which can also influence how they think about the problem. Thus, I believe the data reported by Dashtestani (2018) reflects Bélisle’s (2006) three models of literacy, functional, socio-cultural and transformational.

The findings set out in Dashtestani (2019) reveal the role of modern technology in making OCoPs significant resources, and emphasise the importance of the appropriate selection of online resources for EAP students to meet their academic needs. Dashtestani (2019) also emphasises the importance of offering authentic materials, so that students have an opportunity to develop practical skills and learn the new norms in academia.

5.2 RQ2: To what extent can engaging in academic CoPs help EAP students develop their academic literacy?

The studies conducted by Rajendram and Shi (2022) and Dashtestani (2018) show CoPs can enable students to develop their academic and general English knowledge, academic content knowledge and language competencies. They can also provide a platform for peer feedback and group work. However, EAP practitioners may need to consider issues relating to the use of language and address these, e.g. translanguaging (García & Li Wei, 2014) as observed in the study conducted by Rajendram and Shi (2022), as students may exhibit different tendencies when using the language during online exchanges.

Several studies examined online English/EAP/ESP courses (Asoodar et al., 2014; Asadnia & Atai, 2022; Dashtestani, 2019) and although they did not examine use of CoPs in EAP per se, they provided valuable information on key benefits achieved when incorporating online activities that resemble CoPs into their programmes. Thus, it can be suggested that creating CoPs in the EAP classroom may help the students to develop their academic literacy. For example, students may develop practical skills, such as the ability to present at online conferences, participate in virtual exchanges, and build academic networks, all of which are important skills in academia, as the increasing use of technology has influenced learning and teaching EAP (Li, 2020), as well as the language selected and the context in which it is used (Walker, 2014).

Furthermore, by engaging in group projects, using, and exploring authentic materials and learning about different norms in academia, students will have an opportunity to develop real knowledge and fulfil communicative needs that benefit real-life exchanges in modern times. As Liu (2022) argues, academic literacy currently means more than simply developing skills in reading and writing academic texts, as suggested by Wingate and Tribble (2012) and Lillis and Scott (2007), who relate academic literacy to academic texts and the way students interact with them.

The study conducted by Asoodar et al (2014) reveals students who perform better and achieve higher scores typically exhibit a stronger sense of community. However, in both projects, the online groups were limited to a single university and thus they did not have adequate opportunities to engage with the wider academic community or engage with others in a more authentic exchange. However, even though the students were working in closed groups, by developing a small community of learning they had a platform upon which to construct knowledge socially (Jarvis et al., 2016).

5.3 RQ3: What constitutes digital literacy in contemporary academia?

Several of the studies reviewed suggest the internet and the widespread use of digital tools is influencing the way courses are taught and studied. As in real life, to function within society, certain IT skills are vital to communicate within the online environment (Bélisle, 2006; Walker, 2014). Learning and teaching have also been influenced by this new trend (Li, 2020), as not only students, but also teachers need to develop the requisite digital skills (Walker, 2014) so as to train their students on how to use the tools and provide appropriate online learning environments (Li, 2020), and to enable students to study and thrive in such environments.

Digital literacy requires a combination of both literacy and appropriate IT skills for online communication, and can correspond to Bélisle's (2006) functional model as noted in the study by Dashtestani (2018) concerning using social media as a platform for collaboration. That study reveals the importance of familiarity with social networking sites and skills when using online platforms to engage socially with others. Similarly, Dashtestani (2019) shows that familiarity with a certain piece of modern software used in research by universities at the current times may be required from students who join OCoPs created by universities.

In addition to technical skills social, communication and language skills may be required, as evident in the studies by Rajendram and Shi (2022) and Asadnia and Atai (2022). These studies show that students may be required to engage in online interactions with others from different educational and social cultures, exhibiting awareness of academic socialization. Furthermore, as claimed by Budianto et al. (2022), successful implementation of certain technologies and online activities in an ESP course can promote the subject-related competencies of students, as well as their skills in using the language with technology. Similarly, Iskandar et al. (2022, p. 75), in their study on academic digital practices, claim that "digital literacy is a critical element of multiliteracy framework required to thrive in the digital era and perceived as cross-curricular competencies, yet it is not adequately addressed in English language teaching".

Moreover, in a globalised world, as suggested by Young et al. (2013), success in academia is likely to require multicultural teamwork and ICC skills (Corbett, 2010; Compiegne, 2021), and considering the increasing use of digital tools and the rapid development of online learning platforms and digital tools, these skills are necessarily influenced by changing technology.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to clarify how CoPs and learning networks can help EAP students develop transferable and relevant academic skills to suit the current digital era.

6.1 Implications of the study

The results of the study illustrate the many ways in which CoPs can be used in EAP. They can also serve as a platform for students to practise core academic skills collaboratively through group projects and online exchanges. They may also enable students to practice skills in social interactions and via online engagement as may be required

of them in academia. Additionally, implementing CoPs in EAP not only enables students to develop their academic skills and knowledge, but also trains them in practical skills that may prove useful in real-life exchanges inside and outside the classroom in modern digital times.

However, as indicated in this discussion, due to current digital trends and the increased use of technologies in academia, as well as growing globalization, engaging students in exchanges with larger online academic communities and providing them with authentic resources would allow them to engage in more meaningful global and multicultural exchanges, an increasing requirement in academia.

While not all the studies reviewed established static formal CoPs, they all effectively examine foundational CoP elements, such as collaboration, practice, and community building across digital platforms. Collectively, the studies reveal that both informal and emergent online communities provide substantial opportunities for students to engage in academic language use and skill development.

6.2 Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the low number of sources selected for the review, and their relevance, as the CoPs examined in the studies were all limited to single universities. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to make strong claims as to how the CoPs can be used in EAP and to what extent participating in such communities can help EAP students develop their academic literacy. Additionally, the study was constrained by a notably brief timeframe of approximately four weeks, which limited the depth and scope of the investigation. However, as the findings suggest, with appropriate tools, training and guidance knowledge can be constructed socially, even within small learning communities.

Although these engagements function as CoPs, enabling students to enhance their academic and digital literacies, the informal or non-static nature of such groups may not fully capture the depth and sustainability of interactions that typify well-established CoPs. Consequently, the findings might not completely represent the dynamics of more permanent or formalized communities, or offer deeper insights into knowledge construction and community engagement.

6.3 Further recommendations

This study underscores the multifaceted role of OCoPs in enhancing EAP students' academic literacy, advocating for their integration into EAP pedagogy, to cultivate a holistic skill set encompassing digital and intercultural competencies. Future research should also aim for a broader empirical exploration of OCoPs' impacts on student outcomes across diverse EAP contexts. This may potentially be achieved through longitudinal studies or comparative analyses across different academic institutions, as needed to better understand the impacts of OCoPs on student outcomes. By further elucidating the dynamics of OCoPs in EAP, educators can develop appropriate online collaborative activities and projects to equip students with those competencies deemed essential for academic excellence and professional success in the digital age. There is also a clear need for more extensive studies relating to this issue, as relatively few have focused on the use of CoPs in the EAP classroom to date.

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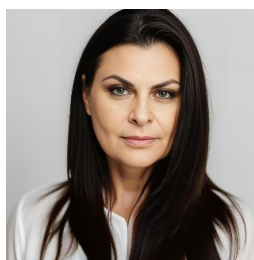
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