

Redesign of Spoken English Zone

1. Introduction

The idea “online communities” has captured popular, as well as scholarly, attention. Numerous websites and dot.com companies advertise their “online communities.” There is confusion, though, about the definition of an online community. According to Brint (2000), communities are aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in the personalities and life events of one another). Under this generic definition of communities, online or virtual communities can be defined as communities in which members interact through the medium of computer technology. Online communities are usually activity-based with little or no face-to-face interaction (Brint, 2000).

Many educators are participating in this movement as well, exploring the educational value of employing a community model for supporting learning. The idea is that through participating in a community, novices can learn through collaboration with others and by working alongside more experienced members and gradually begin to adopt the practices of the community. This social view of learning treats learning as a process of constructing practice, meaning, and identity all in relation to a community of practice. Learning is conceived as a trajectory in which learners move from legitimate peripheral participants to core participants of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Another hot issue related to online communities is web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 refers to a set of principles and practices that use the web as a platform for services that enable users to control their own data and media, and with a central focus on participation so that collective intelligence can be harnessed from distributed user communities. Web 2.0 applications usually demonstrate one or more of the following principles/features, but may miss others.

- ◆ As a platform – the collection of pages still look like documents but are actually interfaces to full-fledged computing platforms
- ◆ Provide services not products
- ◆ The network effect applies: the service automatically gets better the more people use it. User adds value as a side effect of use.
- ◆ Architecture of participation: It is a community emphasizing participation, sharing, and collaboration.
- ◆ "We, the media," a world in which "the former audience", not a few people in a back room, decides what's important.
- ◆ Not places to go but things to do, ways to express yourself, means to connect with others and extend your own horizons – where we live.
- ◆ Two-way communication with the user: reading and writing.
- ◆ User-generated content – with enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow
- ◆ “Live” Web – continuous changing

- ◆ Organizing the content by user tagging or folksonomy – a naturally created classification system which arises as a result of user-based tagging. A user tags an object such as a bookmark in order to remember it later, that information is then added to the global tag cloud and helps to create a folksonomy.
- ◆ Harnessing collective intelligence (using the wisdom of crowds) – turning the web into a kind of global brain. A collective intelligence is achieved when a critical mass of participation is reached within a site or system, allowing the participants to act as a filter for what is valuable.
- ◆ Can be administrated by just a few people (thousands of people not on the payroll actually building the thing)
- ◆ Data as building blocks for Web 2.0 applications
- ◆ Control over data may be their chief source of competitive advantage
- ◆ AJAX is also a key component of some Web 2.0 applications to enable rich user experience as rich as local PC-based applications: interactive, participatory, as well as social.
- ◆ Easy to use – the entry bar is low.
- ◆ End of the software release cycle: there is no need to install programs and patches; software is delivered as a service. Upgrades and future versions happen seamlessly, most without the user's knowledge.
- ◆ Spreading by word of mouth – "viral marketing." In B2C e-business, word-of-mouth is the No. 1 driver of traffic to Web sites (Cothrel, J. 2000).
- ◆ The Long Tail: Web 2.0 applications are designed to serve not only popular but fringe interests.

Some current popular examples of Web 2.0 applications and practices include blogging, vlogging, wikis, social bookmarking, photo uploading and tagging, video uploading and tagging, and podcasting.

Based on the above definition of communities in general and online/virtual communities in particular as well as those common features of current web 2.0 applications, Exue (<http://exue.com.cn>) can be classified as an online community for the service of learning foreign language which use some web 2.0 features. The language groups on this online community include English, French, Japanese, and Germany. Users are Chinese who are interested in learning foreign languages. Within this big community, a sub-community called "Spoken English Dedicated Zone" is for a group of users who want to improve their spoken English. My analysis will concentrate on this sub-community: <http://bbs.exue.com.cn/forumdisplay.php?fid=40>.

2. Learning Needs and Community Services/Features

2.1. Learning Needs

On the highest level, the users' need in this community is to improve their spoken English. Reading and writing are also important English language ability. However, this community is solely dedicated to spoken English. The community is basically a forum with some other complementary tools or services. It is a very common business model of online community now in China, which is usually referred as BBS there. It is like a

message board but with some enhanced functions or Web 2.0 technologies. Next, I will analyze the system's services and content generated and how it addresses the user's needs in the context of web 2.0 technology.



2.2. Service – Message Board

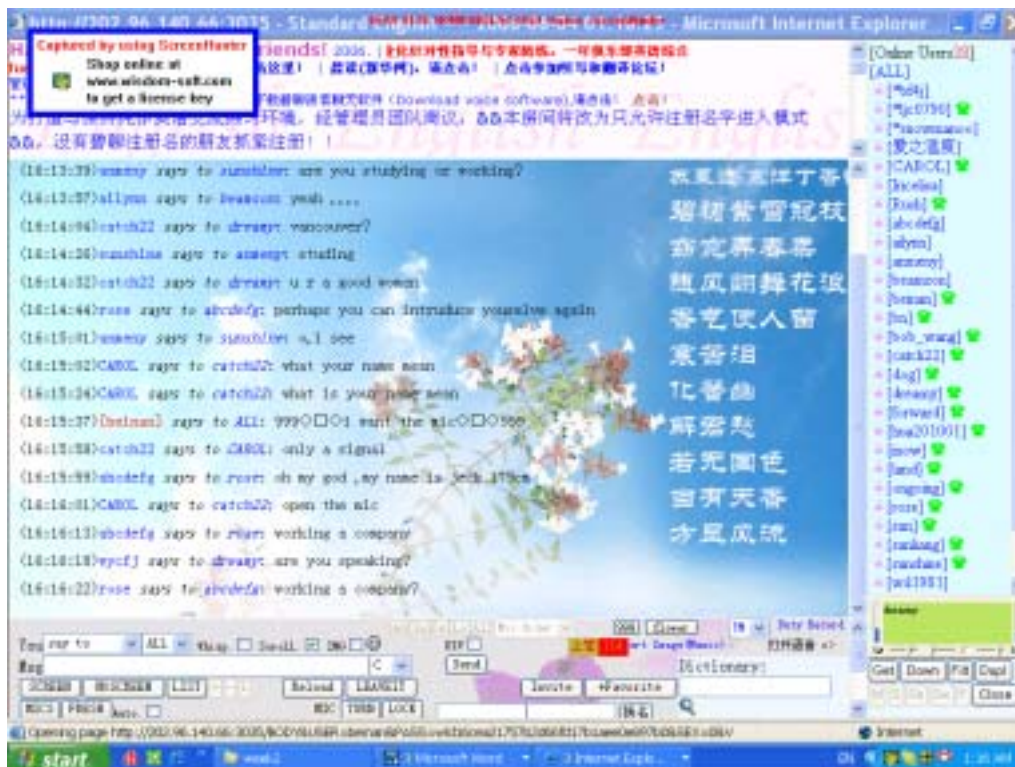
The community provides a threaded discussion board for members to post ideas and comments. Generally, users can post any ideas they are interested in and make comments. But most postings focus on three areas: sharing learning strategies/reflections on learning, recommending/presenting learning materials in the message body or as attachments (will address this issue later), and making request for learning materials/learning strategies. The web is not only readable but also writable in two levels: users can read and post message and the postings are editable and can be modified later. But only message owner can edit their own posts or comments. There are some posts regarding how to effectively improve spoken English and members' reflection on the learning experience. But, based on my participatory observation and content analysis, most of this kind of posts are not in-depth and intelligent discussions. One thing worthy to mention is that users are allowed to insert multimedia files into the message body. In lieu of web 2.0 technology, the threaded discussion board is a service and read/write web. It does use collective intelligence. But, the posts and comments do not reach a (tentative) final product based on collective intelligence, while in online communities using wiki technology such as wikipedia, there is usually a tentative final product at one time based on collective intelligence. Therefore, spoken English users need more efforts to make decision on which learning materials and strategies to use than in the situation that there is a consensus (even if tentative) based on collective intelligence. Under this general discussion board, there are three sub-forums/aggregators: Downloading Center – holding links pointing to posts with downloadable attachments (will discuss it later), Highly Recommended – holding links pointing to posts highly ranked by the management team

(still not clear how they rank the posts), and English Pronunciation – dedicated to English pronunciation topics (not sure it is sub-forum or aggregator collecting pronunciation related posts from the general forum.

2.3. Service – Uploading and Downloading

This online community also provides uploading and downloading service. It was mentioned previously that one way for users to share information is through attachments. When users post message they can attach various types/formats of files including text, audio, video, graphic, and software, actually any type/format of files. Most of attachments are learning materials which are usually officially published and either have an electronic version or digitalized by users. Only a few of them are really created by users themselves in a strict sense. The uploaded materials have been divided the owner into different levels with each level having different access restriction. More actively users participate in the community activities (will address how the community determine activeness of participation later), the higher levels they can access. There is a downloading center for users to download available information. It is actually an aggregator to hold all posts with attachments – links to the posts which have attachments. Users can also locate these postings on the general discussion board themselves but it requires more efforts.

2.4. Service – Chatting Room



The community provides a chatting room (both text and voice) for members to practice spoken English (one to one and many to many) with a dictionary tool. Most of real online learning happens in this chatting room. Members are allowed to chat in English

only, either publicly (many to many) or privately (one to one). The idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity (Barab, MaKinster, & Schecker, 2004). However, there is evidence that more experienced members seems not willing to communicate with less experienced ones (Finholt, 2002). One member said that: “good English speakers usually do not want to speak with us less competent speakers.” There is another problem associated with the chatting room. Base on my observation, the learning happened in the chatting room is not effective. The common scenarios are that two members meet and start chatting; then two minutes later they stop. The part of the reason is that, in most cases, they are not pedagogically trained, therefore do not know how to effectively teach and learn from each other.

2.5. Service – Blogging

Exue also provides blog service to it members. Since the service is just recently (05/29/06) launched, its educational use has not yet been fully explored by either its members or the management. The management team has not disclosed their vision how it should be used for educational purpose. Currently, it has the following functions/features:

- ◆ Journal: users can write text and insert image, flash, video/audio, and links into the journal body.
- ◆ Photos: user can upload and share their photos with others.
- ◆ Files: user can upload and share actually any type of files with others.
- ◆ Buddy List: user can add and delete their buddies
- ◆ Social Bookmarking: user can book and tag the websites they might want to visit later and share with others
- ◆ Favorite Websites: users share their favorite websites with others.
- ◆ RSS Feeds Input: users can input RSS feeds from other websites into their own blogs
- ◆ Forum Post Input: members can input their own forum posts into the blog and keep posts synchronized at both places.
- ◆ Comments: the blog allows readers to make comments.

2.5. Service – Sub-Groups

The community also allows its members to organize and establish their sub-groups. Since this service was just launched recently (06/02/06), more time are needed to see how it evolves and how it can be utilized for educational purpose. For the most active discussion sub-groups, the community rewards with e-money. There is one post for the announcement of this service inside Spoken English Dedicated Zone. Members need go to <http://group.exue.com> to register for their groups. Anybody can register groups. There is no restriction. Currently, there exist just a few groups. For instance, one group, called “Friends Learning Group,” focuses on the TV series “Friends.” It has 9 members now. Discussion topics range widely from which character they like, the plot, to where they can find the video. The service the sub-group can provide is very simple, currently just textual posting.



2.6. Service – Others

The community provides several online dictionary tools to assist learning: Online Dictionary (kind of mash-up between two free web applications), Grammar Dictionary, and Idiom Dictionary. Another service provided by the community is short message/email by which users can communicate to each other privately to exchange ideas, share information, and build friendship. Users can subscribe to the content. There is RSS feeds link listed on the website.

2.7. Features – Ranking Mechanism

There is a ranking mechanism to put the best contents on the top, but the rank is decided by the community administrators. There are some mechanisms to encourage participation. For each post and uploading, members are rewarded e-money and points. The amount of e-money and points awarded depends on the quality of posts and uploading which are determined by how they are ranked and whether they are recommended to be put on the top positions. With the e-money and points, members can access some restricted and core contents. For example, some downloadable materials may require users to have at least 50 e-bucks to download, while others may just need 1 e-buck. The charge is determined by the owners.

2.8. Web 2.0 Features

Based on the above analysis, this online learning community does demonstrate some web 2.0 features. First, the community is a platform providing learners services to share

learning materials, reflect and comment learning strategies, and to practice spoken English through computer-mediated communication tools. In a sense, it harnesses collective intelligence, though there is much room to improve. Although most of learning materials are just electronic version of officially published books, video, and audio files, they are provided by members and therefore user-generated. It is two-way communication with the user: both read and write. It provides RSS feeds for others to subscribe. It also uses mash-up technology to take advantage of online free web applications. It is a community emphasizing participation and sharing. It is also a “live” web and keep continuous changing – posting, uploading, commenting, editing, updating, etc.

3. Problems and Recommendations

Although Spoken English Dedicated Zone provides various services and tools to address the users’ needs, there are some problems and therefore rooms for improvement. Since the community exists primarily for the service of learning, next, I will discuss the problems and make recommendations for improvement in lens of community building, pedagogy, and user interface.

3.1. Purpose of the Community

When I visited this community for the first time, I could only guess what this community all about from the community’s name and the content on its Web site. Although the community’s name “Spoken English Dedicated Zone” can tell visitors it is about spoken English, spoken English itself is a broad concept. There is no place on the Web site to clearly say what this community is exactly for. Unless you communicate your purpose clearly, people will sue your Web community in ways that you never intended (Kim, 2000). Communities are successful when they serve a clear purpose and make the purpose visible (Kim, 2000). Therefore my recommendations are

- ◆ A short tag line that identifies the community’s purpose: **Talk to Learn, Learn to Talk.**
- ◆ A longer mission statement that explains what the community is all about
- ◆ A distinct visual design that sets a mood and sets the group apart from others
- ◆ A backstory that tells about the history of the group, and how it came to exist

3.2. Social Scaffolding

The educational value of employing a community model for supporting learning is that through participating in a community, novices can learn through collaboration with others and by working alongside more experienced members and gradually begin to adopt the practices of the community (Barab, MaKinster, & Schecker2004). This social view of learning treats learning as a process of constructing practice, meaning, and identity all in relation to a community of practice. Learning is conceived as a trajectory in which learners move from legitimate peripheral participants to core participants of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). The members go through a membership life cycle from visitor, novice, regular, leader, to elder. It is community builders’ job to create an environment that fosters basic social roles, while meeting the changing needs of your members as they become progressively more involved in community life.

Except a help link on each page and a few posts regarding community rules and how to use some tools, the community lacks a strong mechanism to foster social scaffolding. My suggestions is to design the community for a range of roles (Kim, 2000), specifically

- ◆ Create a visitor center: **clearly visible** from the front page of your site, for example, the “New to eBay” link on eBay’s home page. Which of the followings are included depend on the depth and breadth of your community: FAQs and press releases, a guided tour, membership requirements, a site map and a search function, an overview of features with instructions for beginners, and policies and guidelines for participating in the community.
- ◆ Instruct the novices
 - Send email letter confirming their membership and telling them something about how the community works and relevant links, but info should not be too overwhelming
 - Welcome the novice with gifts.
 - Educate novices by meeting, special message board topics, and chatting room events to try and practice
- ◆ Reward the regulars
 - Get personal: provide a start page (e.g., eBay’s My eBay for a serious eBay user) as a reward, my buddy list, and private gathering places
- ◆ Empower the leaders
- ◆ Honor your elders

3.3. Feedback

Successful community building is a constant balancing act between the efforts of management to plan, organize and run the space, and ideas, suggestion and needs of the community members. To achieve this co-evolution, the community management team should create and maintain feedback loops to evolve and update the community features and platform (Kim, 2000). If the members can see how their inputs are shaping the site, they’ll develop a sense of ownership and be more likely to take an active role in the community.

On the community’s Web site, there is a general link “Contact Us.” The purpose for “Contact Us” is vague and it is not enough to elicit the members’ ideas, suggestions, and feedback. There should be an explicit and dedicated mechanism to elicit and collect the members’ feedbacks. At least, the community should use email, message boards, chat, surveys, or even interviews to collect data for complaints about technical problems, a wish list for new features, and requests for new gathering places or topics. During my 6 weeks’ participation, I did not see any of the above happened. Ideally, the community should also have a mechanism to collect and analyze some behavioral feedback page hits, time spent on site, message board and chat statistics, and responses to direct marketing. Since I am just a general participant in this community, I am not sure if the community has this mechanism. If not, the management needs to build this mechanism.

3.4. Sub-Groups

One sure sign of a healthy, thriving community is the emergence of small, close-knit groups of members who make their home within the community setting. These groups

attract members who share a common interest or purpose and allow them to maintain a feeling of intimacy as the community expands. People form their strongest, most enduring relationships in small, focused groups (Kim, 2000).

As I mentioned earlier, the community just launched its sub-group service recently (06/02/06). More time are needed to see how it evolves and how it can be utilized for educational purpose. Although the community cannot actually create close-knit groups, it can provide an environment and guidelines to facilitate and help purposeful groups to coalesce and flourish. Based on my participation, there is much room for the management team to improve in this aspect, since the management almost provide its members no group guidelines/strategies. More guidelines and strategies should be provided by the management to help members form and flourish groups. Specifically, the management team should educate and inform the members the following group guidelines/strategies and/or create the environment that supports the following group guidelines/strategies. Shortly put, the management team should make them explicit:

- ◆ Groups are successful when they serve a clear purpose: have a short tag line that identifies the group's purpose, a longer mission statement that explains what the group is all about, a distinct visual design that sets a mood and sets the group apart from others, a backstory that tells about the history of the group, and how it came to exist and provide content, tools, and links that are relevant to the group's purpose
- ◆ Groups need gathering places to congregate and communicate: have mailing lists, message boards, chat rooms, or buddy lists.
- ◆ Group application should be part of member profiles: have a member roster along with evolving and meaningful information about each member and tribal markers (visual indicators) of group membership integrated into each member's ID and/or profile.
- ◆ Group should accommodate and support a range of roles (newbie, elder, etc): have a way to indicate length of membership and leadership roles in the member roster (member ID), a way to indicate which features and activities are accessible to visitors, a welcome package that's sent to new members, and advanced features that are only made available to regulars
- ◆ Groups benefit from strong leadership: have a list of leadership roles within the group, along with their powers and responsibilities, a way to provide training and instruction for group leaders, and leader tools for filtering content, controlling access, and communicating with the group
- ◆ Groups develop their own etiquette (local ordinances): have a place to announce the group's membership requirements, a place to post the code of conduct and privacy policy, and reinforcement tools (ability to ban members, remove content, and so on)
- ◆ Groups get stronger when they hold cyclic events (regular meetings, guest speakers, competitions, etc): have a group calendar for planning and promoting events, a meeting place for holding group events, publishing tools for posting meeting notes, interview transcripts, or contest results, and access to a community calendar for announcing group-sponsored community events.

- ◆ Groups are strengthened by the rituals of community life (initiations, weddings, memorial services, etc): have a way to create group-specific welcome rituals, a way to place seasonal and holiday decorations in the group's clubhouse, tools to support rites of passage (such as group and leader initiation rituals), a way to track and send birthday announcements within the group, and a way to announce important group events (like the group's birthday) to the wider community
- ◆ As they grow, groups may need to form internal subgroups: have mechanisms for creating subdivisions within the group.
- ◆ Timing: build tools and features early; launch a subgroup program later (after establishing the community culture)
- ◆ Create barriers to exit: build group identity into your system by offering rich and integrated group profiles that reflect a group's ongoing evolution and achievements; provide tools, recognition and support for group leaders; contain the havoc that bad leaders can wreak – relieve the leader or let him or her leave.

3.4. Pedagogical Issues

3.4.1. Vocabulary, Expressions, and Grammar

To master conversational English, the learners first have to know what vocabulary and sentence patterns to be used in expressing what they want to express in a specific situation or context. For example, when having meals in a restaurant in an English-speaking country, the learners first have to know what vocabulary and sentence patterns to be used to express specific wants and needs. When the learners are uncertain about what vocabulary and sentence patterns are appropriate, they can post their questions and requests. The community members actually did so to find answers. As I mentioned earlier, it does use collective intelligence. However, the threaded posts and comments do not reach a (tentative) final product based on collective intelligence. Therefore, spoken English users need more efforts to make decision on which recommendation to use than in the situation that there is a consensus (even if tentative) based on collective intelligence/the wisdom of crowds.

Wiki technology can be used to address this problem. The community can provide a wiki tool like wikipedia in which members can create and edit each entry to contribute to how to use the appropriate vocabulary, sentence, and grammar to express specific ideas for a specific scenario. For example, members can create an entry for eating at restaurant by using the wisdom of crowd to figure out the appropriate vocabulary, sentence patterns, expressions, grammars, cultural issues used in the context of restaurant. A collective intelligence (a final collection of vocabulary, sentence patterns, expressions, and grammars at one time, though tentative over a period of time) is achieved when a critical mass of participation is reached within a site or system, allowing the participants to act as a filter for what is valuable and appropriate. They are ready for members to use in the similar scenario.

3.4.2. Pronunciation

To effectively communicate orally, learners have to pronounce correctly. It is a very common scenario that when an English learner tries to communicate with others in

English in the chatting room he or she, although know which vocabulary and expressions with correct grammar to use, does not know how to pronounce or can not correctly pronounce one or a few words. Although the chatting partner(s) may give help or feedback, there is no guarantee that the partner(s) will certainly do so and the feedback is correct.

The community can build in a robust tool to address this learning problem. Now the community has three dictionary tools: Online Dictionary, Grammar Dictionary, and Idiom Dictionary. But these dictionaries do not have pronunciation function. An audio dictionary can be provided as learning tool for user to check the pronunciation. Users can enter the word online and to find the meaning and pronunciation or they can just simply mouse over the word for the meaning and pronunciation if the word is already there. This tool can facilitate students' learning not only when they are working alone and but also when they are talking with each other through the chatting room.

3.4.3. Communicative Language Learning

Spoken English Dedicated Zone is an online community for second language acquisition, specifically for conversational English. Second language acquisition has its own special pedagogical principles. The construction of the community not only should be informed by the community building principles in general but also should be guided by the second language acquisition theories.

There are many ways to teach and learn language. One is called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language (Wikipedia, 2006). This method is learner-centered and emphasizes communication and real-life situations. Language is used for communication. For this reason, CLT makes use of communication to teach languages. Whereas traditional language teaching places a lot of emphasis on grammar rules and verb conjugations, CLT emphasizes real-life situations and communication in social and situational context (Galloway, 1993). While grammar is still important in the CLT classroom, the emphasis is on communicating a message. In CLT, students practice real-life situations, for example, buying food at the market or asking someone for directions. In these exercises, the goal is for the student to communicate his or her needs and thoughts, without worrying about having perfect grammar.

The community seems to have employed this approach by using a chatting room for user to communicate in English. However, based on my participatory observation, just providing a gathering place to communicate in English is far insufficient. Some supporting tools and aids are needed, especially for those less competent members, to facilitate and foster the communication and maximum the learning outcome.

The common scenarios, which happen in the chatting room, are that two members meet and start chatting; then two minutes later they stop. Based on my chatting with some members, there are various reasons for this. The reasons could be one of the followings or a combination:

- ◆ All participating partners are competent for communicate in English for only a short time. In some cases, discussion spaces, if used at all, were mostly populated by the knowledge-poor rather than the knowledge-rich (Cothrel & Williams 1999).
- ◆ One is competent and others are less competent. The competent one thinks he or she can not benefit from the communication, while the less competent ones feel frustrated.
- ◆ Even if the more competent one is willing to help the less competent ones as a tutor, he or she might not be pedagogically trained and therefore do not know how to effectively teach and learn from each other

In the chatting room, there is only a dictionary tool to facilitate users' communication. In addition, communicative language teaching/learning emphasizes real-life situations and communication in social and situational context (Galloway, 1993). To leverage the chatting room's role in developing users' communication ability, the communication should be guided, simulate real-life situations, situated in social context. It should provide supporting tools to offset the skill gap between more competent members and less competent members so that both parties can benefit from the online chatting. The management should also provide tutoring tools to voluntary tutors to maximum the tutoring outcomes. The management doesn't need to worry about the content. The community just needs to provide a gathering platform and some leadership. All content can be generated by those enthusiastic members by using the wisdom of crowds. The followings are some recommendations.

Scenario/Topic-Based Skit Resource Center: It can be wiki-based and use collective intelligence. Each skit is about a scenario simulating a real-life situation in a specific social context, for example, seeing a doctor, shopping at a mall, job interview, etc. One scenario can have different level skits, for example, beginning level, intermediate level, and advanced level. It can also have different versions to accommodate different number of participants, for example, two, three, or four participant version. There is a list in the chatting room interface linking to these skits. The users can role play to practice these skits, just base their talking on these skits, or get hints from these skits whenever they feel stuck in their own free or topic-based conversation and need external resource to continue. By using these skits, the communication is more likely to simulate a real-life situation. With hints from these skits, the skill gap between less competent members and more competent members can be offset.

Tutoring Support Center: in a conversational English learning community like this discussed here, the tutor/learner pairs are usually formed on voluntary basis. As I discussed earlier, the volunteer tutor might not be pedagogically trained. Therefore, the community should have a mechanism to make sure that the learning resulted from the tutoring can be maximized even if the tutor does not have pedagogical expertise specific to the language. To achieve this, the community can provide a tutor support center which is a collection of user-generated lesson plans using collective intelligence. The community provides a platform, guiding principles, and the lesson format, the users created each lesson plan including learning objectives, content, learning activities, and

assessment. Here is another example of using one of web 2.0 features – harnessing the wisdom of crowds. The underlying principle for the design of the tutor support center is communicative language learning approach. The learning activities should simulate the real-life situation. The assessment should be performance-based tests evaluating learners' communication ability in the real-life situation. Communication is both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. The center can be embedded into the chatting room. Next, I will describe a scenario to demonstrate how it will work.

Student: Guided Conversation Space

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a language learning interface. The browser address bar shows a URL from search.msn.com. The main content area features a menu titled 'RESTAURANT' with sections for 'VEGETABLES', 'SOUP AND SAUCES', 'SWEET & SOUR', 'CRISP BREAD', and 'EGG AND YOUNG'. Below the menu, a text box shows a conversation: 'You Said: "Fresh salad has most desire I would say: "Fresh salad is the most desired"'. Below this, a green box says 'The word is: abundance' and a yellow box says 'Abundance: ###'. A blue box on the left lists 'Vocab To Use' with items 'Hot', 'Rice', and 'Spicy'. A blue box in the center contains the text 'Please say that again Can you type that word?'. A blue box at the bottom left says 'Vocabulary student is trying to learn'. On the right side, there is a video window showing a woman named 'Jane Doe' wearing a headset. Below the video is a 'Scenario Progress' section with a list of items: 'You've answer 12 of 30 questions.', 'You have used 5 of the recommended vocab words', and 'Your trainer has made 10 corrections'. Several callout boxes provide additional information: 'Shared visual space with learner. Includes images (i.e. menu) to prompt conversation, and drawing and whiteboard' points to the menu; 'Video over IP – video greatly enhances ability to learn language' points to the video window; 'Integrated Vocabulary' points to the word 'abundance'; and 'Recordable methods to interact with trainer without interrupting flow of conversation' points to the progress section.

Suppose the tutor/learner pair engages in a one hour learning session. At scheduled time, the learner and the tutors go to the chatting room and log in. The system matches the learner and the tutor and initiates a learning session. The student picks a learning level and topic from the tutoring support center depending on his or her level. The corresponding expected learning outcomes, suggested learning activities, and recommended assessments list appear on the screen. Then, the tutor and learner follow the guided learning process designed by using collective intelligence which is guided by communicative language teaching approach. This can ensure at least a bottom line quality of learning outcome, even if the trainer does not have pedagogical expertise specific to the language, compared to not using this tutoring support system. The system provides cues and visual stimuli to both the learner and the tutor to allow for the guided session.

The activities are mainly performance and scenario-based learning mirroring real life situation such as role-playing selling products to foreign tourists or serving foreign guests as waiter or waitress in a restaurant. During their conversation, the tutor can give oral feedback and/or textual feedback. There is a dictionary tool for learners to look up new vocabulary and automatically store the word into the student's new vocabulary list. It also stores and quizzes learners on the relevant words for the scenario. The learning can also be conducted in group. However, the maximum learners in one group are limited by 4 by default to ensure each learner has enough time to practice. At the end of the session, the tutor uses an online rubric to evaluate learner's performance. For each scenario at each level, there is also a visual example or visual rubric in the form of a video to show learners what is expected for the topic. The video is accessible even before the session so that students know what they are expected and what they should focus on. The learning session is recorded and stored into the students' profile. The learner can later review the session to see what he or she needs to improve on, re-listen to parts he or she did not understand and identify strengths and weaknesses. This feature can develop the learner's metacognitive ability – an important ability in learning.

Attract Native English Speakers to Join: From my observations, there is no native English speaker in the community. Provide conversational Chinese practice opportunity (using the same platform) to native English speakers who are interested in learning Chinese. Pair them so that they can benefit from each other.

Gaming for Language Acquisition: Every day, millions of users interact, collaborate, and form relationships with each other through avatars in online MMORPG environments (Yee, 2006). According to Yee (2006)'s research, MMORPGs do not only appeal only to teenagers. They are online environments where young professional adults, middle-aged home-makers and retirees interact and collaborate on a daily basis. More importantly, the average MMORPG user spends more than half a work week in these environments. The excessive usage exhibited by certain MMORPG users might appear problematic at first, but in fact the mechanisms of appeal in MMORPGs could be harnessed for pedagogical purposes. Some advocates of game-based learning even suggest that educational video games are the only way that educators can adequately engage the "video game generation" (Yee, 2006).

Multimedia such as Massively Multi-User Role-Playing Game (MMORPGs) is an ideal way to teach language using CLT as the theory (Bacon, 2006). It allows for realistic simulations of communicative situations (Bacon, 2006). There are many such programs using gaming, such as "A la rencontre de Philippe" or "Who is Oscar Lake?" They place the learner in a situation in which understanding basic communication, and social and cultural contexts are vital to advancing in the game.

The community can create a virtual town in which members are presented through avatars. They are living in this virtual town as if they were living in a real town. They are doing the same routines as if they were doing in real life. For example, they need to go to a grocery store to buy cooking materials. They can play different roles as a student, waiter or waitress, or a doctor. By doing these routine jobs, they need to interact with

others using appropriate vocabulary and expressions in English. By being engaged in these activities, they can improve their communication ability in a situated social context. All those pedagogical considerations presented in the previous section “tutoring support center” can be implicitly embedded into the gaming-like virtual environment so that it is not a game yet remains engaging, not a lesson yet fosters learning (Barab, et al. 2003).

3.4.4. Blog as E-Portfolio for Assessment

Exue also provides blog service to its members. Since it is just recently (05/29/06) launched, its educational uses have not yet been fully explored by its members and the management. The management team has not disclosed their vision on how it should be used for educational purpose. Based on the functions the blog has currently and the readings covered in ed 298, I believe it is an ideal candidate for members’ e-portfolio. Members can use this space to post their learning “products” for peer assessment and to record their learning progress, reflection on learning process, as well as self-assessment on their learning. Members can use Journal function to post their reflection and self-assessment. They can show their learning products by uploading or linking multimedia files such as video and audio. They can ask their buddies from the Buddy List to assess their learning and give comments. They can also use Social Bookmarking to store their favorite websites and share with others. They can even use Input function to input their own forum posts into the blog and keep them synchronized at both places. The members can subscribe RSS feeds from other web sites and input them into their blogs.

3.4.5. Video/Audio Annotating as Feedback:

Feedback, especially corrective feedback, plays an important role in second language acquisition. While comprehension is essential for language acquisition, such acquisition does not entail unconscious or implicit learning processes; and that noticing is indispensable for the acquisition process (Gass, 1990). According to the noticing hypothesis, in order for input to become intake for second language learning, some degree of noticing must occur, and that it is corrective feedback that triggers that learners’ noticing of gaps between the target norms and their interlanguage, and thus leads to subsequent grammatical restructuring. Without direct or frequent corrective feedback in the input, which would permit learners to detect discrepancies between their learner language and the target language, fossilization might occur (Gass, 1990).

For conversational English acquisition in an online environment, learners’ learning products are usually in the format of video/audio file. Learners post their learning products for feedback on their blogs. Learning needs to be understood in the context of their naturalistic situations and socio-cultural environments (Pea, 2005). For one person to understand another person there must be a “common ground” of knowledge between them. There should be a mechanism for the tutors or peers to give corrective feedback around a common ground of reference. The community can provide a video/audio annotating tool. The tool can be similar to the Diver (Pea, 2005) but with one more function – audio annotation, because in learning conversational English, correct feedback and annotation, (e.g., correct feedback for pronunciation) often needs to be in the format of voice.

manageable (Norman, 1988). Unnecessary features should be avoided. Or at least, they should be hidden. The purpose for the chatting room is to improve oral English by talking with each other. All those features which just make decoration should be avoided. On the other hand, more tutoring and learning aids (as discussed earlier) should be embedded into the user interface and make them visible.

The background picture should be avoided. Based on cognitive theory and research evidence (Clark & Mayer 2003), pictures that decorate the page (decorative illustrations) should be avoided; but instead add pictures that help the learner understand the material (explanative illustrations), which can foster deeper cognitive processing in learners. The reason is that decorative illustrations will make the learners cognitively overloaded, therefore affect the learning (Clark & Mayer 2003). Similarly, the private text chatting should be separated from public chatting to avoid the interference.

4. Evaluate the Success of the Changes

A successful online learning community is one that achieves its purpose (Cothrel & Williams 1999). Some goals are measurable and some are highly resistant to quantification. I will use the incremental value approach developed by Cothrel (2000) to evaluate the success of the changes I suggested. In the case of Spoken English Dedicated Zone, its purpose is to effect a positive impact on oral English learning through participating community activities. The additional value that the community generates as a result of its community efforts should be reflected in two aspects: participation and learning. It can be calculated by comparing the measures before the changes and after the changes

The measure of participation can include the following index:

- ◆ Page views
- ◆ Session time
- ◆ Community click-through (what percentage of visitors to the home page click through to a community program)
- ◆ Registered members
- ◆ Repeat visits
- ◆ Frequent visitors
- ◆ Postings per day/week/month
- ◆ Read-to-post ratio
- ◆ Page additions
- ◆ Page revisions
- ◆ Peak number of concurrent users (in live events)
- ◆ Total number of users (in live events)
- ◆ Audience penetration (if the total size of the target population is known)
- ◆ Conversion rate from visitors, members, to active members

Most of these measures describe what is happening in the community, but they do not tell much about what it means to the learning (Cothrel, 2000). The learning outcome should be measured too. The community can use online survey for members to self-report their

learning experiences. Although the self-reported learning might be not objective, it is better than doing nothing.

The difference between the value created by the community after the change and the value before the change can indicate, to some degree, how successful the change is. More important, the management team should use community measures not only to keep score, but also to make fact-based decisions to improve the community over time (Cothrel, 2000).

5. Summary

Spoken English Dedicated Zone is a sub-community of the second language acquisition community “Exue.” It focuses on oral English learning. Its audience is primarily adult English learners in China. Its users’ learning needs are to improve their spoken English. The community serves the users’ leaning needs by providing the services of message board, file uploading and downloading, chatting room, blogging, social bookmarking, sub-groups, online dictionary tools, short message/email, and RSS feed subscription.

This online learning community does employ various web 2.0 technologies, including providing a read/write web platform for services instead software, harnessing collective intelligence, emphasizing participation and sharing, harnessing user-generated content, providing RSS feeds for subscription, using mash-up technology, and keeping continuous changing.

Although the community provides various services and tools to address the members’ learning needs, there are some problems and therefore rooms for improvement in terms of community building, pedagogical principles, and the user interface. Recommendations for improvement include communicating clear purpose, providing social scaffolding, asking feedback, leveraging sub-groups, using wiki for vocabulary, expressions, and grammar, providing audio dictionary for pronunciation, building communicative language teaching/learning aids into the chatting room, using game for language acquisition, using blogs as e-portfolio for assessment and video/audio annotating as corrective feedback, and having more user-friendly interface

The success of these recommendations can be evaluated by adopting Cothrel (2000)’s incremental value approach, though some goals are measurable and some are highly resistant to quantification. The incremental value that the community generates as a result of the change efforts should be reflected in two aspects: participation and learning. It can be calculated by comparing the measures before the changes and after the changes. The management team should use community measures not only to keep score, but also to make fact-based decisions to improve the community over time (Cothrel, 2000).

Reference:

- Bacon, S. Communicative language teaching. Retrieved on June 5, 2006 at <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/Articles/comlangteach/index.htm>
- Barab, S., MaKinster, J., & Schecker, R. (2004). Designing System Dualities: Characterizing An Online Professional Development Community. In Barab, S. A., Kling, R., & Gray, J. (Eds.). *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 55-91 (36 pp).
- Brint, S. 2001. Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept. *Sociological Theory* 19(1): 1–23.
- Clark, R.C. & Mayer R.E. (2003) *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.
- Cothrel, J. (2000). Measuring the success of an online community. *Strategy & Leadership*, 28 (2), 17-21.
- Cothrel, J., & Williams, R. L. (1999). On-line communities: helping them form and grow. *J. Knowledge Management*, 3(1), 54-60.
- Finholt, T. A. (2002). Collaboratories. In B. Cronin (Ed.), *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, Vol. 36. Medford, NJ: Information Today.
- Gass, S. M. (1990). Second and foreign language learning: Same, different or none of the above? In B. VanPatten & J. Lee (Eds.), *Second language acquisition* (pp. 34-44). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kim, A. J. (2000). *Community building on the Web*. Berkeley, CA, Peachpit Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norman, D. A. (1988). *The design of everyday things*. New York: Doubleday.
- Pea, R. (2005). Video-as-data and digital video manipulation techniques for transforming learning sciences research, education and other cultural practices. In J. Weiss, J. Nolan & P. Trifonas (Eds.), *International handbook of virtual learning environments*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2005.
- Wikipedia. Communicative language teaching. Retrieved on June 5, 2006 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communicative_language_teaching
- Yee, N. (2006). *The Psychology of MMORPGs: Emotional Investment, Motivations, Relationship Formation, and Problematic Usage*. In R. Schroeder & A. Axelsson (Eds.), *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. London: Springer-Verlag.