

Building the Learning Community through Activity-Based Learning among KG Non-Specialist EFL Teachers

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Abstract: The current qualitative study examines, on the one hand, the impact of an activity-based learning course on building a classroom learning community among KG non-specialist EFL teachers. On the other hand, the study is concerned with investigating the effectiveness of the suggested course in enhancing participant teachers' professional development in terms of their teaching performance and teaching portfolios. Data collection sources were a classroom learning community scale, self-evaluation reports and a scoring rubric for assessing the participants' teaching portfolios. In terms of KG teachers' responses on the classroom community scale, the activity-based learning course was probably effective in building the learning community regarding some specific aspects while it was not effective enough with respect to some other aspects. Analysis of participants' opinions on self reports revealed that the activity-based learning course positively affected their actual teaching performance. The obtained results also showed that the adopted course was effective, to a great extent, in developing participants' teaching portfolios. Based on the study findings, appropriate conclusions and implications have been addressed.

Keywords: Learning community- "Activity-based learning"- Professional development.

Introduction

Building learning communities has been recently one of the most innovative trends in the field of education. Importantly, providing a relaxed learning environment has been viewed as a crucial avenue toward effective teaching and learning. In this respect, Vale and Feunteun (1995) claim that providing a relaxing learning atmosphere encourages learners to share and exchange ideas. Moreover, they gain the confidence to lend and receive support from peers, to take risks with new language, new ideas, and new roles. Accordingly, they successfully participate with the support of their peers, at their own level and relate to the teacher without the fear of possible ridicule and correction.

Many contemporary teachers and researchers working within the field of education have been interested in converting the culture of the classroom into communities of practice that support active student participation and shared responsibility for learning. In these classroom cultures students are encouraged to initiate collective discussions as well as negotiate challenge and provide feedback to the ideas presented by the other members of the learning community (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007; Wray, 2007; Sztajn et al., 2007; Padwad & Dixit, 2008).

Promoting active and collaborative learning through students' involvement, student-student interactions and faculty-student interactions has become the focus of learning communities (Salazar, 2006). From this perspective, learning may be viewed as a process of identifying personal histories that narrate the journeys of novices as they move towards more mature, expert ways of participating in a community. Teaching may be viewed as a partnership where regular opportunities are provided for learners to use speech in collaborative activities with others, to adopt different roles within the learning process, to modify the ways in which they relate to each other, and to see that participation in learning is for everyone regardless of age, intellectual ability, socio economic rank, or religious beliefs (Brown, 2007).

Rovai (2002) suggests that members of strong classroom communities have feelings of connectedness. They have duties and obligations to each other and to the school and they possess a shared faith that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared learning goals. Equally important, "friendship and fun are major players in the learning process... most of us cite fun, interest, enjoyment as factors that promoted our learning and recall such moments as those that have stayed in our memories" (Vale & Feunteunm 1995, p. 22). In this respect, McMillan (1996) considers sense of community as "a spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art" (p. 315).

Wilson and Berne (1999, as cited in Sztajn et al., 2007, p. 971) report that each successful professional development project they analyzed struggled with how to build community and in particular, with how to build trust among participants in these communities. To add, Salazar (2006) theorizes that self-regulation might be seen as a part of classroom learning community as it can help students work toward and reach a shared goal. Wernet (1995) is of the opinion that the construction of meaning is a vital and central component in a knowledge building community and the members share knowledge for the advancement of the community.

However, engaging students in meaningful and productive discussions in the learning community requires more than creating a friendly, secure environment for learning. In this regard, Engle and Conant (2002) propose that supporting productive disciplinary engagement can be attained through

discussion, sharing authority in addressing, defining and solving problems and through assigning considerable responsibility to the students to share the disciplinary norms of the learning community with their peers. Moreover, students should be equipped with effective resources including balanced teacher scaffolding which inspire individual students with analytical and social support (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007).

The Learning community: Nature and Structure

Trying to explore the notion of community, Salazar (2006, p. 2) poses a set of queries: "Was community the reason why I felt a different atmosphere in certain classes and was a better teacher in these classes? Was community why these students learned more and enjoyed the course more than students in larger classes? If so, how did community develop and what other kinds of effects did it have on students?" McMillan and Chavis (1986, as cited in Rovai, 2003, p. 351) define community as: ... "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together".

Rovai et al.(2004) claim that learning has important social and cognitive dimensions and occurs most effectively when the school provides a positive social environment with a strong sense of community. Social community, as explained by McMillan (1996), represents the feelings of the community of students regarding their spirit, cohesion, trust, safety, trade, interdependence and sense of belonging. Learning community, on the other hand, consists of the feelings of learning community members regarding the degree to which they share group norms and values and the extent to which their educational goals and expectations are satisfied by group membership.

In these communities, as proposed by Sztajn et al. (2007. p. 972) participants engage together in decision-making processes and share certain practices that define and nurture the community. In this regard, Smith (1991, cited in Salazar, 2006) claims that learning communities provide learners with the opportunity for active, collaborative and social learning, as well as the opportunity for interactions with faculty. Chesebro, et al. (1999, cited in Salazar, 2006) support this claim by stating that a learning community can be established through enhancing student- student collaboration, faculty- student collaboration, active involvement of learners and knowledge construction process. A strong sense of community should facilitate interactions in any classroom community. Members of such communities exhibit behaviors that are associated with the traditional concept of community (Rovai, 2002).

It would also be helpful to examine further the actions and structure of the classroom including teacher actions that contribute to students' feeling of community in their class. Examining the different activities, both group and whole-class, would also give greater insight into the different factors

that affect classroom community (Salazar, 2006). Brown (2007, p. 126) is of the opinion that teachers and students involved in the formation of a classroom community of practice will represent to themselves and to others, what they take their classroom community to be about and how they will insert themselves into it. A community of practice classroom is not quite the same space for all participants. It appears to be a social space in which difference, diversity, and inclusiveness may interact to create a classroom culture in which students may construct different social positions at different times within the life of the community.

Matusov (2001) argues that a lack of shared focus in classroom activities, a lack of space for students' respectful disagreements, and a lack of students' engagement in a caring practical action are basic difficulties in designing a classroom community of learners. Learning in this classroom may be understood through a consideration of the social patterns of participation and influence that different individuals and groups achieve within an institutional setting such as a classroom (Brown, 2007). Also, Salazar (2006) concludes that every classroom has its own personality- a fusion of teacher, class, and student variables. Although it is important to investigate each, it is the dynamic among the three that impacts community in the classroom. Along the same line, Kovalainen and Kumpulainen (2007) argue that the participatory practices of the classroom and the roles individual take during the practices develop and change at the same time as the community itself develops.

Activity- Based Learning: Nature and Process

Based on work by Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues, activity theory poses a very essential question about the nature of action an individual or a group is practicing in a particular setting. Activity- based learning approach can be viewed according to Anandalakshmy (2007) as an effective system that can work in keeping learners engaged and fully occupied, while they are acquiring the fundamentals. The activity- based learning method and materials can successfully be investigated through five basic mirrors: The nature of learning environment, learners' involvement in a process, role of the teacher, clarity of content, and creativity scope. Besides, activity theory provides an alternative lens for analyzing learning processes and outcomes that captures more of the complexity and integration with the context and community that surround and support it (Liaw, Huang & Chen, 2007).

In an activity theory, the subject means the individual or group of members engaged in the activity. Objects in activity theory are artifacts those produced by the system. Tools are that the subject uses them for acting on the object. Rules operate in any context or community refers to the explicit regulations, policies, and conventions that constrain activity as well as the implicit social norms, standards, and relationships among members of the community (Jonassen, 2002 as cited in Liaw, Huang &

Chen, 2007). Moreover, constructivist epistemology emphasizes that learners should take the responsibility of deciding on the experiments they need to be involved in, with a view to testing their own ideas and hypotheses (Hung, Tan & Koh, 2006).

To reflect the real world, the activity- based learning environment allows students to work with their peers and experts in the field on the learning task. Moreover, collaborative work provides learners with ample opportunities to share and discuss each other's views and opinions (Choo, 2007). To explain, in an instructional setting, following Vygotskian concepts, a task consists of the instructions or directions that the teacher gives students for learning- that is, the behavioral blueprint provided to students in order to elicit learning. In this context, an activity is what students actually do with these instructions, that is, the behavior (regardless of whether it is overtly observable or purely mental) that occurs when students perform a task that has been presented to them (Oxford, 2006).

One basic advantage of activity- based learning environment is to prepare learners to be autonomous, critical thinkers and knowledge constructors (Choo, 2007). Furthermore, there is an evident enhancement of: learners' understanding of the content, interpersonal skills, aptitude to engage in group activities and capability to relate the topic to real- life situations. Most importantly, this learning approach does possess the potential of developing the experience and confidence of teachers through a collaborative approach for building a positive teaching- learning environment (Lakshmi & Hee, 2005).

Collaboration: A Basis for Learning in a Community

Roth (1995, as cited in Brown, 2007) claims that productive practices are more readily adopted by students when learning opportunities are provided in a classroom culture that encouraged students to build on each other's ideas. The learning activity was realized as a small group task on students-selected species in addition to realizing the actual investigation task, the students and the teacher spent time on discussing collectively the procedures of doing research in general. This was followed by a small group activity in which the students negotiated joint rules for presenting their posters within the activity. The presentation rules were gathered together and discussed as a whole class. Collective discussions were also held at the end of each poster presentation (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007).

As displayed by Rovai (2003), students have more discussions and feel a higher sense of community in courses where the group work and discussions are a graded course component. Salazar (2006) argues that collaborative learning and active learning may play a vital role in creating an effective learning community. "Among the indicators of promotive interaction are opportunities for social influence, helping, accountability to peers , and social modeling, all of which are expected to increase as positive face-to-face interaction among group-members increases"(Summers & Svinick, 2007,p. 56).

According to Matusov (2001, p. 393), learning how to do group work involves at least the following three mutually related aspects: (1) opportunities for the students to experience it on a regular basis (another recursive process), (2) space for public reaction on their group work, and (3) a language of talking about means of group work and problems emerging in group work. Guided by the teacher, the students should be encouraged to take the epistemic authority in the classroom by hypothesizing, reasoning, inferring consequences, defining concepts, calling for evidence and judging. From the social viewpoint, the joint negotiation situations provide students with opportunities to practice skills in learning to listen to others, respecting diverse perspectives and constructively responding to them as well as encouraging others to join in the discussions. The emphasis in collective discussions is on the actual processes of negotiation rather than on defining answers (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007).

Group work and discussions should be a part of the course requirements in order to really be effective in creating a learning community (Salazar, 2006). Additionally, Summers and Svinicki (2007) propose that students must believe that the efforts of all group members are needed within cooperative learning situations or else the group will not be successful with regard to the learning task. It is this perception of whether the relationship within group is working effectively to reach shared goals that we believe is the key to understanding the students' individual goals and positive outcomes of cooperative learning.

To critically examine and possibly refine the nature of participation of individual classroom members in pedagogical activities, such as in whole-class discussions, it seems worthwhile to make visible elements in classroom interaction that mediate classroom members' opportunities to engage in joint dialogue. The examination of the characteristics of individual students and their participation profiles are likely to contribute to our knowledge of the conditions and processes supporting equal opportunities for learning through participation and discourse within the social context of the classroom (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007, 143).

The Teacher in a Learning Community: What can He Do?

Being a part of a classroom learning community can be a valuable experience for the teacher in that it could bring out a spirit of positive beliefs and feelings towards teaching. Lichtenstein (2005) found that the role of the instructor was critical in creating a sense of community in the classroom. Classroom community was present when instructors were approachable; showed a respect for students and developed a personal relationship by getting to know the students. These skills helped instructors to lead discussions involving students to help them understand the material and helped instructors to listen to questions from the students in order to respond appropriately and to reframe student questions that were unclear in order to focus their thinking.

Salazar (2006) agrees that teachers must be collaborators , able to work with the students as they learn and even be a part of the learning process themselves (discover new knowledge), and finally, teachers have to be motivators , one who can help keep the students focused on the task and interested in the learning process. As noted by matusov (2001, p.384), in a community of learners, the instructor may guide the students by modeling how the instructor deals with difficult situations, how the instructor deals with his/her own pedagogical mistakes, and how the instructor learns from mistakes, This makes the philosophy of community of learners a constantly moving target like learning itself .

Zion and Slezak (2005) indicate that the teacher as a facilitator means that the teacher should guide the students through the learning process instead of dictating student learning and bridge the gap between the content, the learning activity, and real world application of the material. The teacher's instructional activities may consist for example of evoking ideas and views, scaffolding problem-solving, monitoring and modeling reasoning processes, re-voicing questions and interpretations, promoting collective responsibility, as well as pacing the tempo of interaction according to the needs of the participants (Kovalainen , Kumpulainen , & Vasama, 2001) .

As illustrated by Brown (2007, p.120) the way the teacher orchestrates the communication of the small group activities to whole class is important for the co-construction of understanding. In managing the reporting process, the teacher can rephrase, paraphrase and re-represent the contributions of particular group, draw connections between contributions, refer to previous problems, and recall the ways in which similar situations were approached in the past. Through these means, the teacher can create for the class a sense of continuity in their work.

Likewise, educational research, as Rovai (2003, p.348) states has focused on the input-process – outcome paradigm, where efforts were directed at examining the relationship of students and teacher characteristics (i.e, the inputs) and the process of teaching with student outcomes. These studies often provided insights into perceptions of teacher communicative characteristics in the classroom and their effects on student learning and behavior as well as on effective outcomes, such as sense of community.

The Problem

The current study is an attempt to explore the impact of an activity- based learning course on building a classroom learning community among KG non-specialist EFL teachers. Moreover, the study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the suggested course in enhancing the participants' professional development. Specifically, the following two main research questions are to be addressed:

1-What is the impact of an activity-based learning course on building a classroom learning community among KG non-specialist EFL teachers?

2-To what extent is an activity-based learning course effective in enhancing KG non-specialist EFL teachers' professional development?

These two main questions are branched into the following four sub-questions:

1.1-How does the activity-based learning course impact the participants' feelings of connectedness?

1.2-How does the activity-based learning course impact the participants' feelings regarding the extent to which learning goals are being satisfied?

2.1- To what extent is the activity-based learning course effective in enhancing the participants' teaching performance?

2.2- To what extent is the activity-based learning course effective in developing the participants' teaching portfolios?

Significance of the Study

The current study may be significant in giving insight into the process of building a learning community among KG non-specialist EFL teachers. In this regard, Rovai (2002) claims that students with a strong sense of community have feelings of connectedness and trust. They possess a shared faith that member's educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared learning goals and membership in the community. Moreover, the activity-based learning course adopted in this study with its practical applications and innovative tasks and activities can be considered as a comprehensive model/guide for KG EFL teachers and teacher trainers.

The present study may also provide empirical evidence for the potential of using teaching portfolios with a view to enhancing KG teachers' professional development. To add, the produced artifacts included in these portfolios may be valued as a resource handbook to be utilized in the area of teaching English as a foreign language to young learners.

Limitations of the Study

The current research is basically concerned about non-specialist EFL KG teachers (both inservice and pre-service). It is mainly targeted towards building a learning community in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, another purpose of this study was enhancing participants' professional development in relation to their teaching performance and teaching portfolios. Professional development can be defined as "activities that develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher" (OECD, 2009, p. 49). Due to some special circumstances and difficulties on the ground, it was difficult to observe participants' actual teaching performance at traditional classrooms. Therefore, two basic sources have been considered to obtain data required for assessing the effect of the activity

based learning course on participants' teaching performance. These were: Written self reports completed at the end of the course and general observations (taken by the current researcher) of micro-teaching group work activities which worked as one basic activity type included in the training course.

Method

In this part of research, a detailed description of the study sample, tools and the activity-based learning course is presented.

Who Are the Participants?

Participants for this study consisted of forty nine KG female teachers enrolled in a program for qualifying non-specialist KG teachers for teaching English. Among a set of other programs, the public service center at the faculty of Education, Tanta University, presents this special program. Participants can be described as specialist KG teachers whose original major is child education. They were affiliated with a wide variety of KG colleges nationwide. These have been working in traditional or experimental Kindergartens across the country. Their ages ranged from around 23 to 36 of the whole. Moreover, their teaching experiences in the area of child education were both rich and diverse. Range of actual years of experience was from around two to fifteen years.

Some of those who took part in the present experiment were enrolled in some graduate programs (Master Degree) in different child education aspects and contexts, e.g., child psychology, growth psychology, and others. Still, others had got a diploma in education (special or professional). A considerable number of participants have proved themselves to be well qualified and well trained. Their distinguished qualification and preparation were outstandingly reflected in their teaching performance as well as their abilities concerning designing and implementing various activities and instructional materials.

The Study Tools

Four basic tools for data collection have been utilized in this study. These were: the classroom community scale; the self-evaluation report; the teaching portfolios; the scoring rubric.

1- The Classroom Community Scale

For the purpose of assessing the classroom learning community, the current study adopted the classroom community scale developed by Rovai (2002). This test instrument generates an overall classroom community score as well as two subscales. The first subscale is intended to measure connectedness which reflects the feelings of the community of students in relation to their connectedness, cohesion, spirit, trust and interdependence. Learning is the second subscale which represents the feelings of community members concerning interaction with each other throughout the process of meaning/ understanding construction and the degree to

which members share values and beliefs regarding how far their educational goals and expectations are being satisfied.

The classroom community scale (Appendix A) comprises 20 items in all, 10 items are related to feelings of connectedness and 10 items are related to learning, i.e., the use of interaction with the purpose of constructing understanding and the extent to which learning goals are being met within the classroom setting. For establishing the extent of the validity and reliability of the classroom community scale, both Cronbach's coefficient and the split-half methods were used. The classroom community scale was found to be a valid measure of classroom community and both the overall scale and its two subscales possess high internal consistencies (0.92 for connectedness subscale and 0.87 for learning subscale). These high reliability coefficients provide evidence that the scale items do reflect, at a more general level, the overall classroom community construct. Moreover, to determine if classroom community differed by courses, a one –way ANOVA was calculated. The ANOVA was significant and the procedures used to develop the classroom community scale provide high confidence that the test instrument also possesses high content and construct validities.

Following each item is a five-point likert scale of potential responses: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The study subjects have to select the response that best shows their opinions or feelings about the item.

2- The Self- Evaluation Report

For the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the activity- based learning course (adopted in the current study) in enhancing the participants' teaching performance, a self-evaluation report (Appendix B) was utilized as a basic source for collecting data. Specifically, at the end of the course, participant teachers were asked to give their reports in a written form. The main question that the participants had to attempt was to write a detailed account about the impact of the activity- based learning course on their teaching performance in their actual classrooms. Some questions or cues were given to guide the participants while completing their reports. These cues basically dealt with what KG participant teachers found beneficial, applicable or interesting in the course to be adopted in their classrooms. To clarify, the participants were invited to write about strategies, techniques, lesson plans, learning tasks/ activities, ... etc., that proved to be effective for teaching English to young learners.

3- The Teaching Portfolios

One basic type of the tasks included in the activity- based learning course adopted in the current study was 'recording tasks'. Through these tasks, participant KG teachers were encouraged to create a teaching portfolio in which they kept a record of practical work and activities conducted in the training sessions. According to Darling (2001), a teaching

portfolio "is a narrative that tells a coherent story" of teachers' learning experiences and "highlights thoughtful reflection on, and analysis of, these experiences" (p. 111). Some artifacts were selected and collected from participants' teaching portfolios (Appendix D). Speaking of the theoretical basis underlying teaching portfolios, Wray (2007, p. 1140) is of the opinion that "teaching portfolio builds upon the conception of 'best practice' and expands the boundaries of this concept when incorporated as a tool to capture the complexity of learning to teach".

Participant teachers had the opportunity to systematically reflect over time throughout the whole course on the varied tasks and activities conducted in the activity- based learning course. Through reflection, teachers had the chance to justify their selections, demonstrate their practical knowledge and share opinions and experiences within the whole group. In addition, they were encouraged to reflect on what worked or did not work in their teaching and to give suggestions for practical applications.

4- The Scoring Rubric

Based on a comprehensive survey of the literature in the area of portfolio assessment (Zeichner & Wray, 2001, Kaplan, O'Neal, Carillo & Kardia, 2005; Williams et al., 2003; Gonzalez, 2004; Wray, 2007), the current researcher developed a portfolio assessment rubric (Appendix c) for use with participants' ultimate portfolio products. The developed portfolio assessment rubric basically contains six diverse features: Variety, Comprehensibility, Images / Models, Evidence of progress, Reflection, Innovation. Each feature is worth a total of ten points. To add, each and every one rubric feature was assessed in accord with four specific evaluative norms: Exceptional (10 points), commendable (7-9 points), Acceptable (4-6 points), Unsatisfactory (0-3 points). Specifically, each feature was assigned some points depending on the relevant evaluative item. Thus, the total sum for each teaching portfolio is sixty.

Description of the Activity- Based Learning Course

In terms of the activity- based learning approach and basically based on work of Vale and Feunteun (1995), the English methodology training course adopted in the current research study has been designed and conducted. The course primarily aims at qualifying KG teachers for teaching English to young learners. A wide variety of practical activities that comprise five main types of tasks are included in the given course. Specifically, there are five main types of tasks; practical tasks, observational tasks, teaching tasks, discussion tasks and recording tasks.

Regarding the first type of tasks; practical tasks, a wide range of cross-curricular experiences are provided. These experiences or areas include art and craft, science, technology, maths, music, storytelling, drama, games, geography, and physical education activities. These practical activities aim at: exposing KG teachers to a variety of first-hand experiences of

enjoyable tasks for the children to practice; To add, making it evident for teachers that through this first-hand experience, they can adapt and use these tasks while teaching children; illustrating the social, motivational value of these practical tasks in the EFL teaching context of children; getting teachers to be learned in a similar way to that they will/may adopt while teaching English to kids.

The second type is observational tasks through which KG teachers explored a teaching situation, or pass through a reading process. The basic aims of these tasks are to provide teachers with points of reference in relation to definite aspects of classroom practice and to introduce resource material regarding specific instructional content, approaches, strategies and techniques.

Teaching tasks come as the third type of tasks. These required that teachers prepare and experiment instructional content, strategies and techniques in the training setting. Moreover, the participant teachers were encouraged to try out new ideas and techniques with children in their real classrooms and report the attained results to the whole training group. The aims of these teaching tasks were to provide teachers with further confidence in the instructional material, skills and methods of teaching.

The fourth type is discussion tasks which were practiced by the participants either before approaching an activity or after completing a task. The main target to be achieved in the first case was to raise the teachers' awareness of the ideas in question. However, in the second case, the basic aims were to encourage the participant teachers to share ideas and experiences and to exchange information within their groups. To add, through these discussion tasks teachers were given further confidence and reassurance regarding their own experiences and ideas about teaching.

The last type is recording tasks through which the participant teachers were encouraged to practice attractive and motivating ways of recording work conducted in a specific training session. The input of this type of tasks is provided in a spiral form resembling that of the practical tasks. Moreover, teachers were encouraged to keep a teaching portfolio of their training course. Importantly, cooperative work with fellow teachers was highly recommended with a view to illustrating their portfolios and creating an attractive record of their studies and their training experiences.

For the purpose of the current research, three main topics (Vale & Feunteun, 1995) are to be dealt with. They are as follows:

- Establishing common ground: Attitudes and approaches to teaching children.
- Starting points: Starting lessons in a language course.
- Building up a teaching sequence.

A fully detailed account of the first main topic is given below as an illustration for both the structure and content of the activity-based learning course.

1. Establishing common ground: Attitudes and approaches to the teaching of children

1.1. Establishing key issues related to the teaching of children

This activity aims at encouraging participant teachers to: identify their priorities as trainees; consider and discuss the key issues associated with teaching English to children in terms of their own feelings and opinions; share views and experiences with their peers in the training group.

The basic question posed in this activity is: What do you want the course to deal with? Think of the four most important issues related to teaching English to children. In five minutes, the teachers work individually and write down the four issues/ questions on four separate slips of paper. When the teachers complete writing the four issues, they hand them to their trainer (the current researcher) who displays them alongside the rest of group's suggestions. Next, each teacher selects the four most important statements that are on display (they may not be the ones they have written before). Afterwards, the teachers share the statements they have collected in pairs. They have ten minutes to discuss and select the four most important issues out of the eight choices they have got. Each pair of teachers joins another pair and the process is repeated. Again, each group of teachers join another group (i. e., eight teachers in one group) to share and discuss the issues they have selected. When they finish, the teachers in each group report their final selection to the whole training group.

Actually, this activity showed a wide range of diversity of expectations which each teacher may have about the training course. Apparently, the given activity helped in establishing common ground in relation to the participant teachers' attitudes and the approaches they may favour in the area of teaching English to young learners.

1.2. Attitudes: What are your views on teaching English?

This activity aims basically at encouraging teachers to express their opinions regarding the reasons behind learning or teaching English. The given activity requires teachers to work in groups of four to read and complete three statements in a table form. These statements are:

- Children learn English because ...
- Adults learn English because ...
- I (am going to) teach English to children because...

After completing the table, the teachers share their responses with the others in their training group.

1.3. A practical challenge: A spider mobile

The practical activities included in the current training course relate to various areas of the school curriculum. These tasks' main purposes are: giving the participant teachers a first-hand opportunity to apply the sort of tasks that they may require the kids in their classes to do; raising the teachers' awareness of specific language teaching points that may be generated by a practical task; giving the participants practice with a wide range of useful classroom instruction language; providing the opportunity for the teachers to work closely and co-operatively with the others in their training group.

1.4. Spiders across the curriculum and the needs of children

1.4.1. A Cross-Curricular analysis

This activity aims at encouraging the teachers to: develop a cross-curricular topic web that focuses on 'the spider' (and other mini-creatures); make a discussion about the potential language points that can be generated through a range of cross-curricular tasks; compare the types of activities that may prevail in a KG classroom with those that usually take place in an EFL classroom. The teachers complete a cross-curricular chart in the course notes. The chart includes a variety of curricular areas: art and craft, music, science, maths, geography, drama and movement, hygiene. For each curricular area the chart provides an example activity and an example language focus.

1.5. Discussing communication

This activity encourages teachers to discuss: the meaning of authentic communication; the importance of authentic communication in the EFL classroom; teaching approaches and strategies that promote authentic communication in the classroom; sharing previous classroom experience with their colleagues.

1.6. Summary

The main aim of this task is getting teachers apply their new knowledge and experiences to complete a text about 'the activity-based approach'. The participants work with partners or in groups of three to share the reading of the given text and discuss what they understand by 'an activity-based approach'. For the purpose of starting this activity, the instructor draws two quick webs on the board. In the first web a language point (verb to be) is placed at the centre and eight traditional EFL language tasks are drawn around it. Choral drills, question and answer practice, song about parts of the body and making a spider are some of these language tasks. In the second web, the word 'spider' is placed at the centre and a cross-curricular web is developed around it including music, math, science, drama and movement, geography, art and craft.

1.7. Round-up: Spider games and rhymes

At this concluding stage, three action rhymes, which are quite relevant to the topic; 'the spider' were presented for the participant teachers. The teachers were given adequate instructions to act out the rhymes as a form of group formation activities. These rhymes are: 'Little Miss Muffet'; 'One Little Elephant Went Out to Play'; 'Incy Wincy Spider'.

Data Analysis

In terms of the nature of the current study, qualitative collecting data procedures were adhered to. Specifically, data collected for the purpose of the present study came from three basic sources: The classroom learning community scale; participants' teaching portfolios; self-evaluation reports. One basic goal of the current study was to investigate the impact of the activity-based learning course on building a classroom learning community among KG non-specialist EFL teachers. To this end, the participants' responses on the classroom community scale were calculated and classified regarding the five basic responses starting from Strongly Agree (SA) to strongly Disagree (SD). Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each of the five responses.

On the other hand, the impact of the training course on the participants' professional development was assessed in relation to their teaching performance and teaching portfolios. Data collected from the participants' self evaluation reports at the end of the course were thoroughly examined and analyzed, resulting in emerging themes and coding categories. In this regard, Bogdan and Biklen (1992, cited in Rao, 2002) indicate that the themes and coding categories should not be determined beforehand or imposed on the data, yet, they are naturally emerged as a result of comprehensive analysis of the obtained data. Another source for detecting the impact of the training course on participants' teaching performance was general observations (taken by the current researcher) of micro-teaching group activities. These observations have been carefully analyzed and classified in the form of specific indicators. Furthermore, the participants' teaching portfolios were analyzed and evaluated in terms of the suggested scoring rubric.

The Study Results

The impact of the activity- based learning course on building a classroom learning community

Following are KG participant teachers' responses on the classroom community scale in relation to the connectedness subscale and the learning subscale. For ease of comparison and contrast, three major imaginary divisions are to be considered and concentrated upon, starting from the highest to the lowest. Moreover, percentages of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' are added together as compared to those for 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'.

Table (1)
The Connectedness Subscale

No	Statement	Strongly agree (SA)		Agree (A)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (D)		Strongly Disagree (SD)		Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	I feel that students in this course care about each other	10	20.41	30	61.22	3	6.12	4	8.16	2	4.08	6
3	I feel connected to others in this course	23	46.94	22	44.9	1	2.04	1	2.04	2	4.08	1
5	I do not feel a spirit of community	4	8.16	4	8.16	-	-	20	40.82	21	42.86	5
7	I feel that this course is like a family	26	53.06	17	34.7	4	8.16	2	4.08	-	-	3
9	I feel isolated in this course	2	4.08	2	4.08	1	2.04	23	46.94	21	42.86	2
11	I trust others in this course	15	30.61	27	55.1	4	8.16	3	6.12	-	-	4
13	I feel that I can rely on others in this course	11	22.45	17	34.7	2	4.08	12	24.49	7	14.28	9
15	I feel that members of this course depend on me	10	20.41	11	22.45	6	12.24	17	34.7	5	10.2	10
17	I feel uncertain about others in this course	4	8.16	11	22.45	3	6.12	23	46.94	8	16.33	8
19	I feel confident that others will support me	17	34.7	20	40.82	4	8.16	7	14.28	1	2.04	7

Regarding participant teachers' responses on the connectedness subscale, table (1) shows that in terms of the highest division (91.8%-85.7%), most of the participants reported that they felt connected to others in the course (91.8% for item 3), that they experienced a family-like atmosphere (87.8% for item 7) and that they trusted others in the course (85.7% for item 11). Yet, 89.8% of the participants disagreed with item 9, thereby indicating that they did not feel a sense of isolation in the course.

As for the average division (83.7%-75.5%), item 5 examined whether or not there was a spirit of community among the course members. However, 83.7% of the participants disagreed with this statement, indicating that they really experienced such sense of community.

Moreover, they expressed that a sense of caring (81.6% for item 1) and support (75.5% for item 19) prevailed within the course members.

On the other hand, in the lowest division (42.9%- 63.3%), items 13 and 15, specifically examined whether there was a sense of interdependence prevailing in the course. Significantly, responses of the participants showed that only 57.2% of them agreed with item 13, and 42.9% for item 15.

Table (2)
The Learning Subscale

No	Statement	Strongly agree (SA)		Agree (A)		Neutral (N)		Disagree (D)		Strongly Disagree (SD)		Rank
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
2	I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions	32	65.31	16	32.65	-	-	1	2.04	-	-	1
4	I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question	1	2.04	5	10.2	1	2.04	27	55.1	15	30.61	4
6	I feel that I receive timely feedback	14	28.57	27	55.1	3	6.12	4	8.16	1	2.04	5
8	I feel uneasy exposing gaps in my understanding	3	6.12	14	28.57	3	6.12	18	36.73	11	22.45	8
10	I feel reluctant to speak openly	8	16.33	15	30.61	3	6.12	16	32.65	7	14.28	9
12	I feel that this course results in only modest learning	3	6.12	13	26.53	4	8.16	18	36.73	11	22.45	8
14	I feel that other students do not help me learn	5	10.2	7	14.28	1	2.04	26	53.06	10	20.41	6
16	I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn	29	59.18	18	36.73	-	-	2	4.08	-	-	2
18	I feel that my educational needs are not being met	1	2.04	12	24.49	1	2.04	22	44.9	13	26.53	7
20	I feel that this course does not promote a desire to learn	2	4.08	4	8.16	-	-	16	32.65	27	55.1	3

Focusing on the first (highest) division (85.7%- 98%), the first and second rank items (items 2 and 16) indicated that the great majority of participants (98% and 95.9% respectively) reported that they were encouraged to ask questions and given ample opportunities to learn. On the other hand, items 20 and 4 examined the negative effect of the course, if any, on the participants' desire to learn and on the potential help that the course could provide for the participants. Yet, most of participants (87.8% and 85.7% respectively) disagreed with the two statements. Therefore, it can be detected that the course clearly contributed to cultivating the

participants' motive for learning. Participants, apparently, received sufficient support and effective prompting when confronting challenging questions.

Concerning the second division (average division: 71.4% - 83.7%), item 6 showed that the course helped the participants receive timely feedback (83.7%). Conversely, items 14 and 18 gauged the course's negative effect, if any, on the participants' ability to collaborate with each other with a view to attaining learning and on fulfilling participants' educational needs. Yet, the participants rejected the two statements, by that means indicating that participants exchanged support and help within the community and that the course did not cause such a negative impact regarding the satisfaction of the participants' educational needs (73.5% - 71.4% respectively).

The last division (the lowest: 47% - 59.2%) comprises three items, two of them are assigned the same rank; the eighth (items 8 and 12). The three items specifically examined whether or not the course negatively affected each of the following: The quality of learning gained from the course; participants' ability to cope with confusing gaps that may block their understanding; participants' capability to produce fluent, open speech. Responses of the participants revealed that 59.2% of them disagreed with the two eighth rank items while only 47% rejected the ninth rank item (item 10).

The Effect of the activity- based learning course on the participants' teaching performance

1- Self-Evaluation Reports

Analysis of the participants' responses on self reports regarding the effect of the activity-based learning course on their teaching performance has yielded three distinct major categories; namely, the capability of teaching English to children informally; Learning about and exploring the recent theories, approaches, methods and techniques in the field of teaching English to children ; promoting teaching effectiveness .

The most common category was the capability of informal teaching of English to children (41.9%). Three key elements can be cited here; the first is that the activity-based learning course has greatly affected their competence of designing and implementing different types of informal language activities through a variety of effective teaching media. The second element centered around the effect of the training course on enhancing the participants' abilities of good planning for teaching in terms of the activity-based approach .To add, enhancing KG teachers' abilities of teaching the same content in different ways and contexts came as the third key element.

The next common focus of responses was that the training course has provided a great avenue to learning about, exploring and adopting recent methods, strategies and techniques in the field of teaching English to children (32.4%). Specifically, three main trends have emerged. These main trends dealt with the training course effectiveness in empowering the participants with innovative teaching styles:

- 1- Group-formation methods / techniques.
- 2- Story-telling techniques
- 3- Problem- solving techniques

The third common category was: promoting the participants' teaching effectiveness (25.7%)". Basically, the participants' opinions about the value of the training course in relation to their teaching effectiveness centered upon the following features:

- 1-Effective management of learner diversity in terms of children's needs interests and learning pace.
- 2- A remarkable increase of self-confidence and motivation.
- 3-Sharing ideas, opinions and experiences with colleagues at schools (learning transfer)
- 4-Enriching participants' teaching experiences through providing the knowledge base they lacked before.

It might be quite relevant and appropriate here to listen to the voices of some participant teachers in terms of what they stated in their self-evaluation reports.

"We used to apply what we practice in the course in our classes with children and identify points of weaknesses and points of strength."

"I have applied 'the circus activity' with masks and simple musical instruments. We observed that the children enjoyed so much. They responded to the song and recited it. They liked the masks and imitated the voices of animals."

"Giving the children the opportunity to share in selecting activities and teaching aids was effective. Also, we gave them the opportunity to express their ideas and interests."

"I have designed an art and craft activity about 'sheep'. The children worked in groups. They were so motivated and happy. They talked about the models they created through the activity."

2- Micro-Teaching Activities

Micro-teaching group work represented one basic activity type in the training course. These activities were conducted in pair/group work form. Three basic micro-teaching activities were done in relation to three topics

included in the training course. These were: 'the spider mobile', 'the circus' and 'the giant potato story'. While practicing micro-teaching activities, participant teachers received a very noteworthy type of feedback from both their peers and the instructor (the current researcher). This type of feedback was particularly centering around two major issues. The first issue aimed to discover whether actor teachers' actual practice matched or mismatched basic principles of the activity-based approach. The second issue sought to disclose if there was agreement between actor teachers' original instructional purpose (already stated in their lesson plans) and that detected by observers (the instructor and peer teachers). General observations of these micro-teaching sessions (taken by the researcher) have yielded some illuminating indicators:

- An atmosphere of interest and fun took place among participant teachers who were so motivated and excited while practicing teaching.
- It seems that most of the participant teachers have attained a considerable degree of success in designing their teaching in relation to learning objectives, instructional material and media, and assessment in a way that demonstrated consistency and harmony.
- Participant teachers used a varied range of instructional media, including audio, visual, and action types. To illustrate, they presented puppet shows (including various types of puppets: stick puppets, finger puppets, marionette puppets) and shadow theatre. They could successfully function and integrate these instructional media into their teaching.
- Most importantly, the majority of participant teachers have evidently got clear goals in mind. To explain, they were quite aware of the basic premise of the activity-based approach; the approach underlying the adopted training course, which basically calls for teaching English informally. Accordingly, it can be detected that this kind of awareness has contributed to empowering those teachers to produce a very distinct type of peer feedback and to make informed teaching decisions.

The Effectiveness of the activity- based learning course on KG teachers teaching portfolios

To answer the second research question regarding the effectiveness of the training course in developing the participants teaching portfolios, a thorough analysis of KG teachers portfolios has been conducted in the terms of the six basic features included in the suggested rubric; variety,

Comprehensibility, Images/Models, Evidence of progress, Reflection and Innovation. Furthermore, overall evaluation of participants' teaching portfolios was conducted in terms of five distinct levels. These were: Exceeds Expectations; Meets Expectations; Minimal Success; Needs Improvement; Unsatisfactory. The following table presents the obtained results in terms of these five distinct levels/categories of performance.

Table (3)

Classification of the Participants' Teaching' Portfolios

No.	Level	No. of portfolios	%	Range of the Earned points
1	Exceeds Expectations	17	34 . 7	54 – 60
2	Meets Expectations	22	44 . 9	45 – 53
3	Minimal Success	5	10 . 2	39 – 44
4	Needs Improvement	3	6 . 1	33 – 38
5	Unsatisfactory	2	4 . 1	32 or less

Table (3) clearly shows that the majority of the participants' portfolios (75.5 %) were found to belong to either the first level; Exceeds Expectations (34.7%) or the second level; Meets Expectations (40.8%). On the other hand, two of the participants' portfolios (4.1%) were evaluated as unsatisfactory. Moreover, it was found that seven of the participants' portfolios (14.3%) have attained minimal success while only three portfolios (6.1%) needed improvement.

The obtained results imply that most of the participants' teaching portfolios are characterized with six basic features: variety of skills, strategies and teaching learning resources; demonstration of clear understanding and application of the course principles; practical and relevant images or models that demonstrate the basic requirements of the course and reflect the content purpose; evident progress throughout the course and a considerable degree of improvement in professional practice; appropriate reflections for the included artifacts that clarify, to some extent, description, rationale for choice and relevance to the course objectives; expression of new ideas and strategies adopted in actual classrooms.

Discussion

In this part of research, description and evaluation of the most important findings within the limitations of the current study are presented. Two basic research questions were addressed in this research work. The

first research question investigated the impact of the activity-based learning course on building a learning community among a group of non specialist EFL KG teachers. In terms of the participants' responses on the classroom community scale (in relation to the two basic dimensions: connectedness and learning), the activity based learning course was probably effective in building the learning community regarding some specific aspects while it was not effective enough with respect to some other aspects.

Firstly, concerning the connectedness subscale, the course was notably successful in fortifying the participants' sense of connectedness on the one hand and minimizing their feelings of isolation on the other. Moreover, the course greatly impressed the participants' feelings through creating a family-like atmosphere. However, it seems that the course could not largely enhance the participants' sense of interdependence. To explain, some participants, probably, could not experience the feeling of being able to depend on each other. With this in mind, it appears that a sense of individualistic tendency might have prevailed among those participants. Furthermore, perhaps there was a degree of misunderstanding on the part of the afore-mentioned participants as regards the two specific items related to sense of interdependence. This current situation could as well be attributed to some operating cultural elements or barriers.

Secondly, in terms of participants' responses to the learning subscale, the most striking aspects that the course helped to bring about were encouraging KG teachers to ask questions, providing ample opportunities and promoting a desire for learning. On the other hand, some participants pointed out that they obviously confronted some sort of difficulties or gaps in their understanding. Moreover, the course might have passively affected participants' capability of openly expressing themselves.

The obtained results seem to be quite related to a considerable body of research studies that deal with the notion of learning communities. Snow-Gerono (2005) has rightly expressed the view that supportive learning communities greatly contribute in providing opportunities and channels for collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. Moreover, feeling safe and secure to ask questions can be considered as a natural outcome of working in a learning community "where uncertainty is not only valued, but supported," (p. 242). Similarly, Wray (2007) is of the opinion that through admitting and recognizing challenges and uncertainty at both individualistic and collective levels, members of the community can get support within the emerging group. To add, speaking of basic requirements of internalizing community norms, Strike (2004) argues that "people begin to internalize the norms of communities because someone cares about them enough to share something they value. Normation begins with caring and belonging, not reasoning and not nature" (p. 222).

Current study findings are also echoed by Bush (2007) who argues that engaging in the learning situation, retaining positive emotions and valuing

respect can be considered as natural outcomes of learners' participation in a supportive and secure environment. As responsible members in the learning community, learners are empowered through feelings of interdependence, connection, and relatedness to others. Moreover, speaking of the basic characteristics of a learning community, Sinder and Venable (2000, cited in Lamb, 2009) suggest that the classroom structure should be designed so as to contribute in enhancing: collaboration on the part of both learners and teachers; perspectivism, considering ideas from many aspects; cooperative learning; connection between the classroom and real life experiences; constructivism of knowledge.

The second research question addressed in this study dealt with the effectiveness of the activity based learning course in enhancing participants' professional development in relation to their teaching performance and teaching portfolios. In terms of KG teachers' opinions on self reports, the activity based learning course has positively affected their actual teaching performance. Specifically, the course has evidently impacted KG teachers' capability of teaching English to children informally. Moreover, they had the opportunity to learn about and adapt recent methods, strategies and techniques in the field of teaching English to children. To add, their teaching effectiveness has been notably developed. As for the effectiveness of the activity- based learning course in developing KG teachers' teaching portfolios, the obtained results have clearly showed that the majority of these portfolios meet or exceed expectations in terms of the six diverse features: variety, comprehensibility, images/ models, evidence of progress, reflection and innovation.

It might be relevant here to present a variety of perspectives on the area of activity- based learning and professional development within teacher learning communities. Nevin, McNeil and Kellogg (2005) present the results of a comprehensive evaluation of an activity-based learning model program for Pakistani teachers and teacher trainers. The program clearly contributed in enhancing participants' subject knowledge, pedagogical skills and dispositions toward new ways of teaching within a global learning community. To add, Padwad and Dixit (2008) argue that teachers participating in a professional learning community can gain personal insight into the problems they confront in their classrooms; they tend to experience critical thinking with a view to analyzing and finding practicable solutions for these problems. Furthermore, creating a learning community has been recognized as one of the basic factors included in professional development. Through collaboration within a learning community, teachers can formulate and cultivate diverse perspectives (Sztajn et al., 2007; Snow-Gerono, 2005).

Speaking of the positive effect teaching portfolios may have on teachers' work in their classrooms in relation to strategies, preparation and implementation of instructional practice, Wray (2007) believes that engaging teachers into discussions and activities within a learning community can notably help them "integrate their professional teaching experiences into their teaching portfolios, thus interrogating and articulating their own personal stories about teaching and learning" (p. 1151). Similar benefits are further reported by Klenowski (2000) who points out that the process of creating and using teaching portfolios can lead to the development of a wide range of skills; independent learning, self evaluation, reflective practice, organization and metacognition. Berrill and Addison (2010) support this claim by confirming the possible role of teaching portfolios as an effective tool both for the negotiation of identity and for the demonstrations of teaching competence. Moreover, teacher portfolios can be looked upon as a tool for bridging the gap between learning and practice as teachers can demonstrate their pedagogical knowledge and skills through the use of actual products that they develop in real classroom settings (Ferraro, 2000; Williams et al., 2003).

Conclusion and Implications

This type of research work on child education with its multi-faceted aspects and issues could provide a wealth of findings and implications that could largely contribute to the development and progress of the field. The current researcher attempted very hard, as far as possible, to limit the investigation to some specific aspects considered as important and urgent from the researcher's point of view. It is hoped that the main aspects and issues tackled in this current research will be of some theoretical and applied value to all those sincerely concerned about achieving progress in the entire area - for children's sakes.

According to Rovai et al. (2004) investigating the sense of community should not be conducted in isolation, yet, researching such notion should focus on other interrelated variables that greatly influence the learning community. However, these variables are dynamic by nature and changing over time. Therefore, it may be pertinent to examine classrooms at different times (and contexts) with a view to detecting the factors that really impact feelings of community (Salazar, 2006).

Further research need to basically investigate how caring and trust may be created among members of a learning community. To add, we should continue researching the role and characteristics as the most crucial elements within the learning community. Actually, the concept of learning community seems to be quite promising and fruitful. We just need to start exploring and appreciating the diverse variables that really contribute to creating a learning community (Sztajn et al., 2007; Salazar, 2006).

Collaboration and group work have been recognized as the best players for attaining success in creating the learning community. Clark (2001, cited in Snow- Gerono, 2005) is of the opinion that trust, care and safety can be looked upon as basic prerequisites for effective dialogue to take place. I would like to conclude with such novel (but perhaps controversial) insight raised by Felder and Brent (2001, p. 71): "As we tell our students, we're sorry if they're unhappy about having to work in teams but the truth is that our job is not to make them happy - it is to prepare them to be professionals".

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