

**TOAST MASTER CLUB EXPERIENCE AS AFFORDANCE  
FOR AUTONOMOUS EFL LEARNERS**

Chin-chi Chao &amp; Yi-ning Chen

**ABSTRACT**

This study provides insight into language learning affordances associated with a ToastMasters (TM) club for autonomous college learners in Taiwan. Drawing on an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004), it aims to understand how a particular TM club as part of the learner's ecology for language learning affords opportunities and how members of various participation experiences perceive affordances around them and use the TM community as mediation for their emergent learning objectives while dealing, in each of their own ways, with the tensions and challenges associated with the community. The study found that TM offers multi-level and intertwined learning opportunities which are embedded in its functions of maintaining continuity, developing communication and leadership skills, as well as providing extended support systems. In fact, the experience of language learning, socializing activities, and service seem more intertwined than separated in the participants' perception. All of these lead to a deeper understanding of agentic language learning in learning communities.

Key Words: ecological perspective, affordance, EFL learning community

**INTRODUCTION**

Since the mid-1990s, scholars who attempt to understand language learning and language learners through the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective have generated widespread enthusiasm and ignited a social turn (Block, 2003) in the field of Second Language Acquisition (or SLA). The concern for an autonomous learner engaging in independent language learning has been re-examined from an ecological view, in which an autonomous learner takes on the meaning of "authorship of [his/her] action, having the voice that speaks [his/her] words, and being emotionally connected to [his/her] actions and speech within [his/her]

community of practice” (van Lier, 2004, p. 8). The emphasis is on the dialogical, discursive and emerging processes featured in the learner’s relations, contexts, value, activities, and learner-perceived affordances. For example, research has found that it is possible to encourage autonomous learning with a supportive community where learners work with teachers and peers towards common goals (Benson, 2011; Ryan, 1991), and, from the ecological perspective, it is how the learner perceives the affordances around him/her that really matters.

In the current study, we are interested in how learners perceive affordances surrounding an informal language learning opportunity and a learning community: the ToastMasters (TM) club. Although originating in the United States back in the 1924 as social clubs with learning foci, TM clubs are widely available to university students in Taiwan aiming to help members develop communication as well as leadership skills. Members can freely choose to enter, stay, or leave in the TM club. For many language teachers the TM club’s ability to congregate autonomous language learners is a rather intriguing phenomenon, which leads to the questions of what TM provides that may be missing from many conventional English classrooms and how exactly learners perceive a TM club as language learning affordance. Previous studies have tended to focus on the effectiveness of the TM club’s activity structure, but we suspect that this kind of research focus actually trivializes the rich implications that a learning community provides for language learning. We believe a better way to understand TM clubs is through an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004): that is, recognizing the active role that the learner plays in interaction with others as well as utilizing artifacts in the complexity of the learning environment and emphasizing the importance of reciprocal influence and relationships among all members. Inspired by such an ecological perspective, this study investigates how learners perceive affordances and engage in the creative use of opportunities afforded to them by a TM university club in Taiwan.

Over a period of 18 weeks we followed and documented activities of a TM university club and four selected members’ experiences in order to address the research question below:

How does a TM club situated in Taiwanese university culture serve as a learning community to support members’ language learning? In particular, what different types of affordance are available, and how do they work together to support English learning?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Concept of Affordance and the Ecological Perspective

The ecological perspective of language learning entails, according to van Lier (2004), “to take account of the full complexity and interrelatedness of processes that combine to produce an environment” (p. 4). As a key concept to this perspective, *affordance* is defined as the relationships between the individual and the world that are perceived by the individual as opportunities or inhibitions for certain activities. An example given by van Lier is a hot stove, which, as he sees it, provides affordances “for culinary activity, conversation on a cold winter evening, warmth for the room and so on,” but it could also inhibit touching because of the danger of burning (2004, p. 4-5). With the same object or experience, people may perceive different kinds of affordances and engage in different activities. For example, in the authors’ Taiwanese cultural background, a hot stove signals culinary activity, but it does not immediately afford ‘conversations on a cold winter evening’ as van Lier perceives because kitchen stoves here in Taiwan are seldom associated with such a conversation experience. Context defines our perception and experience in the ecological perspective, and we are all capable of perceiving and relating to the world actively, creatively, and emergently as we engage and participate in activities. From this perspective, language learning entails activities in a community of practice in which the learner has full authorship of their activities and has the opportunity to define the meaningfulness of their activities in their own voice.

### The Concept of Learning Community

According to Barab, Kling, and Gray (2004), community is not a substitute for “group.” A community in the service of learning includes fundamental elements like shared goals and beliefs, significant history and heritage, and the community’s self-reproductive cycles (i.e., ways to recruit new members), in addition to socially interdependent members (Barab & Duffy, 2000). In Wenger’s view (1998), a shared repertoire like routines, gestures, and ways of behaving will develop and shape over time with collective decision-making and negotiation among members in a community. History and prolonged engagement are keys. In fact, through long-term engagement members in a learning community not only work towards shared intellectual goals but also develop emotional bonds and a

sense of belonging to the community (Heath, 1995). Such a psychological attachment is what McMillan and Chavis (1986) termed “a sense of community,” which is “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” (p. 9).

Community generally implies a positive experience, but harmony and coherence cannot be guaranteed as heterogeneity does exist among members from various backgrounds and with different belief systems (Wenger, 1998). Hugo (1996, 2001) investigating a hundred-year-old women’s study club suggests that “learning in community is a complex, multilayered, and often contradictory process” (Hugo, 2002, p. 6). The contradictions identified in the study include “the balance between social control and individuality; group restraints and supports; the kind of knowledge that has been privileged; gender, race, and class influences; and the degree to which this learning community is rooted in local and national contexts and is subject to larger social concerns in addition to the concerns of its individual members” (Hugo, 2001, p. 10). Obviously, contradictions cannot be avoided, but as Engeström (1987) maintains, they are the driving force for change, learning, and development in a community. It is by documenting contradictions and tensions of a learning community that researchers can best understand the learning opportunities it affords.

#### **Toastmasters Clubs as Learning Communities**

The particular learning community that this study is interested in, the Toastmasters Club, has a worldwide management center -- the *Toastmasters International*, which is a non-profit organization founded as a social club in California, U.S.A., in 1924. To date, it has nearly 260,000 members in more than 12,500 clubs in 113 countries. The goal, according to information posted on the official TM website, is to help people around the world become better public speakers and leaders (*The Toastmasters International Website*, n/d).

The first TM club in Taiwan was established in Taipei in 1958. Since then, more than 150 clubs have been founded island-wide. The languages focused on in the Taiwan TM clubs are diverse, including English, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Hakka, with English clubs being the majority. Professionals and students in Taiwan tend to consider it an opportunity to

learn English and sharpen their English speaking abilities, despite the fact that the original purposes in the U.S. are simply “communication and leadership skills.” Based on the context in which a club is situated, there are neighborhood TM clubs, corporate clubs, and university clubs. A university-based TM club is usually established by students with the support from the TM Taiwan Headquarters and the students’ affiliated university. At the time of this study in 2009, 19 university-based TM clubs were chartered in Taiwan, half of which were located in Taipei, the capital city of the country.

All TM clubs hold regular meetings weekly or biweekly, typically for one to two hours each. The regular meeting is like a learning-by-doing workshop where members practice and learn public speaking as well as leadership skills by taking on various meeting roles. All the regular meetings in the worldwide TM clubs follow a similar activity structure which includes three essential sessions: Prepared Speech, Table Topics, and Evaluation sessions. In the Prepared Speech Session, members take turns delivering a three to five minute speech in response to an assigned topic. The Table Topics Session is to help members develop impromptu speech skills. The Evaluation Session is designed to provide members with various kinds of feedback, including Individual Evaluation (IE), Language Evaluation (LE), and General Evaluation (GE).

TM clubs as an informal learning opportunity for developing communication and leadership skills have enjoyed widespread and long-term popularity in Taiwan. In one of the studies that investigated TM clubs, it was found that members’ public speaking anxiety was greatly reduced (Chen, 2000). Other researchers (e.g., Chou, 2003; Sun, 2008) have also used the activity structure of Toastmasters club to conduct their English classes. They acknowledged the positive impacts of this model on language learning in terms of developing communicative competence and learner autonomy. However, there has not been sufficient research investigating the actual experience of those participating in TM using qualitative methodology. Since TM clubs are seen in 19 universities in Taiwan and are growing, there is a need for language educators to understand what exactly learners’ experiences are in these clubs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Ethnographic Research Tradition**

We conducted this study as ethnography, with prolonged and multiple engagements in the field. As Tedlock (2000) contends, “a key assumption [of ethnography] has been that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of the subjects than they can by using any other approach” (pp. 455-456).

In order to understand the TM club, we worked as two ethnographers investigating the community from two different roles: The first author was the university advisor for the club, which gave her the opportunity to stand on the side observing how the club officers planned and conducted the club activities, particularly in the background. The second author, as a research assistant, signed up to be a formal member of the club. With the permission granted by all the club members, we participated and documented all aspects of the club activities, including meetings and planning activities within the period of eighteen weeks.

### **The Site**

The TM club we focused on is affiliated with a university in the northern part of Taiwan. The club was founded in 2005 by a group of Commerce majors with the support from the TM Taiwan Headquarters and the university’s Office of Extracurricular Activities. Students from various disciplines participate in the two-hour club meeting every Wednesday evening. These weekly meetings are organized by a group of 18 to 20 experienced members who regularly take turns serving as the Officer Team. They lead the club activities and create a friendly learning environment for themselves as well as other members.

### **The Participants**

The participants of this study included all the club members during the fall semester of 2009, although we later focused on only four of them as our representative cases. Forty-five members in total were on the roster at the time of data collection. Many of them were undergraduates from this university; only a few were students elsewhere. In order to understand how members of different disciplinary backgrounds and diverse lengths of

membership experienced this club, we first identified each member's discipline of study and length of participation in the club. Then, we intentionally selected four members with one to four semesters of participation experience and different majors to be the focal participants. The four members included in the study were Stella, a new member in her very first semester in the club; Wayne, a sophomore who was in his second semester of participation; Claire, who was to begin her third semester; and Olivia, starting her fourth semester in the club. (All names are pseudonyms.) The table below summarizes the number of semesters that they had been in the club, their majors, the number of talks given in the data collection semester, as well as their key leadership roles when the data was collected. Detailed descriptions of these four participants can be found in Chen (2010).

*Table. Durations of Participation, Majors, Talks Given and Leadership Roles for the Four Focal Participants*

Pseudonyms	Stella	Wayne	Claire	Olivia
Duration of Participation	Her 1 <sup>st</sup> semester	His 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	Her 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	Her 4 <sup>th</sup> semester
Major	History	Law	English Language & Literature	Political Science
Talks given in this semester	One	Three and winning three contests	Three	Five
Leadership Roles	Occasional Helper	Receptionist and various meeting roles	Vice President & President-Elect	Minute Taker

### **Data Collection**

In the fall semester of 2009, we entered the club and started our on-site observation. The researcher sat in the crowd of members, audio-recording each regular meeting while taking notes. The observation focused on operations and functions of this club as well as the attempts

made by the club to support English learning. The four members' activities were also documented through close observation and in-depth interviews.

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the four informants. The first interviews were to understand the participants' backgrounds, including their English learning experiences, motivation for joining this club, and their impressions of the club at the time. The second interviews were conducted eight weeks later to clarify some of our observations and to ask follow-up questions. The third interviews were conducted at the end of the semester, in which the four members reflected on the semester, voiced their opinions about club activities, evaluated their own performances as well as indicated changes and progress that had been made. All of the interviews were about 60 to 90 minutes long and were audio-recorded. Chinese was used at all the interviews.

Apart from on-site observation and interviews, all the documents circulated in the club were also collected, including those from both *the Toastmasters International* and the particular university TM club. These documents were helpful in reconstructing critical events during data analysis period.

## DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were transcribed as soon as possible and were sent for member checking. All formal and informal documents, observational logs, and interview transcripts were reviewed, coded, analyzed, and triangulated. There were two parts to the analysis: The first dealt with how the club as a whole functioned and helped members to develop into public speakers. The second part was theme-based, focusing on the four participants' experiences. The themes were generated on the basis of the research questions, including (1) participation in the club, (2) English learning in the club, and (3) problems and conflicts. Data related to any critical incidents that happened to the four focal members were put under related categories. On-site observation triangulated with interview data helped reconstruct the experiences of the focal participants.

## RESULTS

In addressing the research question, our analysis revealed four key



types of affordance in this TM club: Maintaining Continuity, Developing Speaking Capability, Leadership Positions, and Extended Support Systems and Activities. Below is a discussion of these affordances:

### **Maintaining Continuity**

Maintaining continuity can be considered one of the most important goals of a healthy community and is perceived as a key affordance by many of our participants. Because of TM clubs' unique mechanisms to maintain continuity, this club actually is very different from many other clubs on campus. First of all, all formal members of this TM club are required to pay a membership fee each year. A large portion of this fee goes to the US headquarters in exchange for their support and the subscription of a monthly magazine on public speaking tips. Other forms of support were provided by many of the Taiwanese TM affiliated clubs. For example, during data collection, there was a time when the club held a campus-wide speech contest. Some personnel from the Taiwan TM headquarters were not just present but also played key roles, including acting as the leading judge, an instructor, and the host. In fact, throughout this contest, these middle-aged men and women from other TM clubs as well as representing various professions, acted as coaches, constantly giving instruction to the chairperson (a female student) on how exactly she should conduct the contest. Their presence in routine meetings was also frequent, to provide not only demonstrations but also instruction and evaluation. We also noted on the website of the Taiwanese Headquarters an announcement made by a high-ranking official about the establishment of this particular university club back in 2005. The announcement asked all members in the other TM clubs in Taiwan to support this newly established university club to the best of their ability.

Because of all the published materials and instruction provided by the Headquarters and frequent help and support provided by senior members from other TM clubs, this university club inherited not just the activity routines, but also jargon and value systems as well as a long history from both the local and international TM clubs. In fact, the club could actually feel like a religious group to a first-time visitor: There are rules about what to say and do and what not to do at different points during the club activity. For example, it is considered inappropriate to say "thank you" to the audience when finishing up a presentation and leaving the podium. They also shake hands when switching places on the stage. It is very clear that

the TM Headquarters' involvement in the development of this university club is prominent, making it not just a conventional student club but an internationally networked learning community. The source of learning for this student club is unconventionally wide and varied; members can be exposed to people from all walks of life and potentially all nations through the global network of the TM system. It is in this unique contextual frame that members develop speaking and leadership skills as this Taiwanese university TM club establishes its own functions and culture.

Besides external support, continuity and sustainability of this TM club also hinges on the commitment of a core group of seasoned members and the ongoing recruitment of new members. In fact, the club invests much effort to attract new members through the university's Club Fair and the Demonstration Meeting at the beginning of each semester. The Club Fair is an official event held by the university during the first week of each semester for the purpose of showcasing all the student clubs in order to match clubs and potential club members. As visitors approach the TM stand, members of the club would introduce the club, answer questions, and invite the inquirers to the upcoming demonstration meeting, which is an opportunity for potential members to experience the meeting and is usually scheduled right after the club fair. During the demo meeting, the leaders (called the officer team) would make a brief introduction of the club. Experienced members would then invite some potential members to give a short self-introduction in English. During intermissions, members would make a point to chat with potential members and answer questions. This event marks the beginning of participation for many new members, while for all the existing members it is an occasion in which they work together toward a common goal. Observing the club members giving their best effort to attract potential members, we realized that the club fair and the demonstration meeting are critical to the continuity of the club and to developing a sense of community.

In addition to the demonstration meeting, many other opportunities exist for bonding: There are the weekly regular meetings, in which members give prepared talks and impromptu speeches as well as assume various meeting or leadership responsibilities. Assuming responsibility in meetings helps members develop the necessary skills to serve, to lead, and to give their best. Since most of the members are students from the same university, they also have many other opportunities to get to know one another well, including all kinds of chance meetings everyday on campus, birthday celebrations at the first meeting of each month, and

many other social activities such as three-day outings organized by the Officer Team in the summer vacation of 2009 and during the winter vacation of 2010. Potluck parties are also held from time to time during the semester. Apart from face-to-face interaction, Internet tools such as BBS and *Facebook* are of course frequently used by these young students.

When examining the four focal members, we found that Stella, the new member, provided the most discussion about membership. At first she said she was not sure whether she would renew her membership for the new semester: There are many reasons: She was not happy with her first talk in the club: At the third meeting she volunteered to share her thoughts about “animals/creatures that she detested most” at the Table Topics Session. She stammered when describing an episode with a cockroach in the dorm, and she had to use much body language to make herself understood. After this first attempt, she acted neither as a volunteer nor a speaker for one full month, wondering whether she should stay.

In fact, she had never thought about staying in any club for a long time. “The clubs that I joined before never made me feel that I could stay for a long time.” She seemed to refer to problems with people and relationships. Indeed, as a new member, she sometimes felt alienated, particularly when other members talked about events that had taken place before she had joined the club.

Although this is the case, Stella participated in most of the social events organized by TM, which allowed her to speak in Chinese with other members and thus become more acquainted with the other members. She later decided to stay; she said with this decision she actually surprised herself. She started to sense that she was being transformed from a member who attended the meetings wishing only to practice listening skills to one who could actually accomplish her speaking assignments. Being a member in the club obviously allowed her the kind of growth (speaking capability) that she wanted to see in herself. She was also glad to have the ability to encourage others and provide support, which suggested positive relationships.

In Stella’s experience, we see how a new member struggles to feel comfortable with the club, including its existing members and activity structure. In contrast to the attempts that the club made to attract new people, what really keeps a new member is a lot more complex: She has to make herself fit in the existing group as well as develop the faith that

the TM club could actually help her become a successful language learner. The importance of social activities and occasional Chinese is clear. In fact, all four members mentioned that attending social activities played decisive roles in their membership renewal, as Claire stated:

The main reason for my continuing the membership is that I like the people here a lot. We get along well and always have a good time. I also made good friends with some members, and we usually do something together in our free time (Claire\_First/27, Nov., 2009).

### **Developing Speaking Capability**

This TM club offers many tasks and activities. In fact, most of the activities happen in the weekly meeting on Wednesday evenings. It is in the meeting that members are given a stage to practice speaking skills through the so-called “communication project,” which are topics for a series of prepared speeches assigned by the TM Headquarters. For example, the first topic that all new members are expected to give is an icebreaker speech -- a prepared talk as well as an opportunity for all the participants to get to know the new member, with the support from other members who play the roles of the LE (language evaluator) and GE (grammar evaluator).

There are in fact seven stages of honors that one could work to acquire. The first of these, “Competent Toast Master (CTM),” is awarded to a member when s/he finishes all ten beginning-level prepared speeches. The highest level is “Distinguished Toastmaster (DTM),” awarded to a member who distinguishes herself in both communication and leadership skills. At the time when the data was collected for this study, there had not been a DTM in this university charter. Most of the members were still working on their CTMs.

Given the high demand for opportunities to give talks, club members complained about not having sufficient time for all to participate at the weekly meetings. The official team then established study group meetings to ensure all members had the opportunity to make two speeches per semester. These meetings were set at one lunch break every month, following the same format for Wednesday meetings.

Despite these efforts, not many members actually made two prepared speeches per semester. The club also tried to provide each member with

chances to make impromptu talks at the Table Topics Sessions, but our observation showed that new members, rather than seasoned members, were more likely to be selected to give talks at these sessions.

Comparatively speaking, our four focal participants were more dedicated to developing their speaking capability and completing the communication projects than many other members. Stella delivered her first formal speech at the tenth meeting. She said she was so nervous that she was shaking all the way through her time on the stage. She became more excited and ambitious taking risks afterwards. “I like the feeling of talking on the stage,” she said in the interview, although she admitted that she had trouble putting her ideas together in a structured way and that she should have allowed more time to prepare.

Wayne, on the other hand, delivered his third assigned speech in a speech contest at the beginning of his second semester. He turned out to be the champion of the contest and soon entered the area-level contest, in which he defeated all the competitors and became the winner again. Finally he competed with champions from seven other areas, winning third place. His secret is to make the most use of resources in and out of the club: He took advantage of the club’s mentor-mentee system to rehearse his speeches and to seek advice. He was also inspired by the Club Visit activity, in which members from other TM clubs with their excellent presentations were taken as his role models.

In contrast to Wayne, Claire valued the opportunities to give impromptu speeches more. As one of the three vice presidents as well as the president-elected of this club, she felt that opportunities to give unprepared talks were everywhere as she fulfilled her duties and supported others in the club. “I always volunteered to say something whenever there was a silence during the meeting, especially at the beginning of the semester. After that, I wouldn’t say much because I want to yield the right of speaking to new members ” (Claire, Dec. 18, 2009).

Claire wanted the club to be better and better, but, interestingly, she was not interested in the communication project: “To be honest, I don’t like delivering speeches. I don’t know what I should be talking about... I can’t come up with a good topic” (Claire, Nov. 27, 2009). Claire completed only three assigned speeches in the three semesters that she was in the club, which was slower than many other members. For her,

the club offered abundant opportunities to train for impromptu speaking as well as to increase her listening comprehension. She said,

We can't be sure that the people we meet in the future will always be fluent in English and it's impossible that we will talk with only Americans. I think there is a need to train ourselves and to get used to various levels of English proficiency. (Claire, Dec. 18, 2009)

Olivia was different. She found that she became more focused on getting her communication project done in her fourth semester. She valued highly the communication project, wanting to complete it as soon as possible:

I don't want to take too long to complete my communication project. ... I have seen the name tag awarded to Competent Communicators. There is also a certificate. Very cool! I want to get it as soon as possible. (Olivia, Dec. 14, 2009)

In order to reach her goal, Olivia took advantage of the two opportunities given to each member per semester and did two speeches each in her first, second, and third semester. In the fourth semester (current), she delivered four: two in the club, one at a speech contest and one at a Club Visit activity, finishing up all ten speeches required for the Competent Communicator status, although she found it become more and more difficult to come up with appropriate content to address the topics. Even her officer duties were related to language learning, since she was responsible for recording comments made by language evaluators. The only problem she found in the process was that there were different comments concerning her word choice, which made her confused: "I thought my word choice was not good, but Tom (note: LE at one meeting) praised me for my good word choice" (Olivia, Jan. 17, 2010).

Olivia's experience sent a warning sign that language support provided in the community may be problematic at times. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that opportunities to develop speaking capability are indeed abundant. It is up to the individual member to make the most use of them.

## **Leadership Positions**

Leadership positions also provide important learning opportunities. In fact, both new and seasoned members of this student club are expected to take on leadership roles. New members usually start with a helper's role, such as being a timer, while seasoned members play more of the key leadership roles at meetings or serve on the Officer Team. However, whenever new members feel that they could, they would be encouraged to take on any leadership roles that they like.

All the leadership positions and responsibilities are shared and rotated among members, and it is the Presidency Campaign that triggers the rotation every semester. Members with only one-semester's membership experience are considered qualified to serve on the Officer Team. The president of the club is also elected every semester, and members who have been in the club for at least two semesters can enter the Presidency Campaign. Members who are willing to take on leadership positions need to inform the officers and sign up for their preferred positions.

The frequent rotation of the Officer Team is expected to accelerate new members' status in the club. In fact, compared to those who do not serve as officers, members who do tend to have more frequent attendance at meetings, and they are more willing to devote time and effort to the club. Olivia experienced such a change in the process of participating in the club.

Sometimes my friends would invite me to dinner on some Wednesday evening, but I always turn down their invitations because I need to participate in the club. I have responsibilities here; I can't be absent. (Olivia, Dec. 14, 2009)

The one-semester presidency has a valuable impact on the sustainability of the club. Once members have served on in the Officer Team, it becomes difficult for them to leave the club because a sense of belonging and commitment has developed. Furthermore, the opportunity to be an officer is a shortcut to becoming part of the core group of the community, and this is an incentive to some new members. The frequent rotation of leaders is also attractive to members who are eager to develop leadership skills for future careers. At one point many members in the

club expressed interest in taking on the role of a chair at meetings, but there were not enough vacancies. In response to this demand, co-chairs were created at the study group meeting, following a model provided by another university-based TM club. With the co-chair positions, many more members could experience a leadership role. Experience gained here is also expected to allow members to play leadership roles at the large-group regular meetings.

One intriguing observation is the connection between leadership positions and English learning perceived by members. As all the functions of the club are conducted in English, members perceive a close connection between the two. For example, Stella felt reluctant to be an officer, not because she did not want to make contributions, but because she did not have the confidence to use English as a medium to fulfill her duties. For Wayne, his statement, “My attitude [toward learning] did become more active after being an officer” clearly indicates the connection (Wayne, Dec. 18, 2009). He took advantage of meetings to develop his proficiency through actively taking on a variety of meeting roles, forcing himself to make good preparation for his duties in advance, paying attention to each speaker and noting any good usage of sentences for memorization. Claire’s position also afforded her opportunities to visit other clubs and invite evaluators. She needed to write many emails in English to members from other clubs whom she wished to invite to the meeting. These functions allowed her many opportunities to use English not just in speaking but also in writing. Olivia’s officer duties gave her reasons to focus on developing her speaking skills, rather than distracting her because one of her responsibilities is to keep notes of the comments given by language evaluators. Based on the four members’ experiences, it is clear that TM’s objectives, developing communication and leadership skills, are actually intertwined and integrated in all aspects of the TM functions, not to be developed in an either-or or one- after-the-other manner as in a conventional classroom setting.

#### **Extended Support Systems and Activities**

In order to foster a sense of community, this TM club makes some additional attempts to create social and gathering opportunities, including outings and potlucks. At the end of each semester, there is usually a popular two- or three-day outing held during the vacation,



while potlucks and gatherings would also be held occasionally during the semester. These extended social activities play vital roles in making members, especially new members, become acquainted with one another.

Another attempt that aims to provide new member support and create a bonding experience is the Family System and the Mentor-Mentee System. All club members are put into six families, in which senior members served as 'parents'. The Mentor-Mentee System was also designed to accelerate the process of novice-turning-veteran by having relatively seasoned members of each family play the role of mentors. They are supposed to act like personal coaches to their designated "family members," offering knowledge, guidance, insight, and encouragement. New members could chat with their mentors, asking questions, seeking resources as well as advice, or asking to rehearse their speeches, as Wayne did in preparing for his speech contests.

Affiliated with an international club, this club also enjoys abundant interaction with other TM clubs. For instance, there are at least two Joint Meetings with other TM clubs in one semester. There is also 'Club Visit', in which members voluntarily participate in the meetings of other affiliated clubs in their free time. In Club Visits and Joint Meetings, members could act as helpers or speakers of prepared speeches, as Olivia did. They would get suggestions from members of other TM clubs. Some growth mechanisms such as officer training are also organized by the TM Taiwan Headquarters from time to time. These extended support systems and social activities are important in the participants' experiences, allowing them to feel connected to the world beyond the campus and tap into a much wider spectrum of wisdom and expertise.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

This university-based TM club as a learning community supports members' language learning with rich domestic as well as internationally-networked resources and allows members to develop skills from a wide variety of formal and informal activities. There were not just activities defined by the global TM Headquarters, such as the communication project, but also those created in this club specifically for this group of members, such as the study group meetings and the family system, which allowed more speaking and leadership positions needed by

the members of this club. It is indeed appropriate to look at the complex and multiple-level learning opportunities and support systems as a big eco-system, which is something that a language classroom or a conventional student club simply does not provide.

Although the club provides rich learning opportunities, it is also clear to us that the agentive learner who takes full advantage of the opportunities around her gets the most benefit. Among all the resources, the regular meetings with their personalized evaluation and multiple feedback mechanisms received the most appreciation. Even when members served only meeting functions and did not give prepared speeches, such as Claire's filling in silence during meetings and Olivia's noting down language suggestions for everybody, the experience could be valuable. Comparing and contrasting the four club members' experiences, we see that as members moved from newcomers to seasoned participants, the so-called leadership roles or community service became more and more critical not just in terms of leadership skills but also for the sake of language learning. For some people, such as Wayne and Olivia, serving the community is not in conflict with their language learning goals. On the contrary, the responsibilities afforded many more opportunities which allowed Olivia, for example, to break the community confinement (i.e., the two-talks-per-person rule) and allowed her to reach her goal faster than other newcomers. Even Claire, who seemed less interested in honing her public speaking skills, found the need to write emails from her role as a co-president a valuable learning opportunity. Although the particular language learning goals set by the community, i.e., public speaking skills, were not her current goal, serving the community allowed her to get in touch with the club's connected and extended ecology and to tap into the rich affordance in other areas of learning that she found valuable. It indeed provided a world beyond the campus and extended her horizons.

Newcomers such as Stella indeed have more challenges to overcome: They perceive fewer affordances around them, and they do not have sufficient confidence and courage to venture into new experiences. The feelings of alienation also need to be managed. Although the club provides a lot of support, newcomers still seldom seek help from experienced members or they do not know what to ask or how. In addition to providing a support system, we found from Stella's experience that having newcomers take on duties through community service are indeed useful.

However, service is also where challenges appeared. During the

process of participating in club activities, all four participants were confronted with diverse problems and conflicts related in one way or another to community service. Olivia could be a valuable asset to the community but she did not have a chance to publicly share the resources that she discovered. Wayne also had similar challenges. Although he excelled in speeches, his suggestion for improving the family system was not accepted by the community. Allowing members to serve is itself an acknowledgement that all members need, but the community seems to fall short in this particular aspect. Claire, on the other hand, was experiencing fatigue in serving the officer team, and she became less interested in accomplishing the assigned communication project. Here we see a controversy: Those who excel in speaking and wish to serve do not necessarily get the opportunity to serve; while those who serve well do not necessarily strive to work on the joint assignment. The three students' experiences taken together reveal some possible problems of this learning community, with service standing right at the center. If the community cannot be more open to members who are interested in and capable of serving and making contributions, limited growth of this community can be expected. For the sake of long-term development of the community and members, it is important that the community rethink its mechanism for service and allow all members to make contributions and feel respected.

In addition to understanding how service enriches individual members' learning experiences, it is also important to point out that this particular TM as a learning community is actually shaped by the unique culture of Taiwanese university life. The original goal for the TM club in the U.S. is developing public speaking and leadership skills in one's own language. Here in Taiwan, the communication skills are taken to mean improving one's English – a foreign language. Students appreciate the TM club as a unique opportunity that one could use English for all kinds of activities and officer duties because such opportunities are difficult to come by in their everyday lives. Even when one sits in the meeting, it is perceived as a good opportunity for training listening skills, as many of them mentioned in the interview. This benefit would only make sense if one is in an EFL country. The members' interactions with one another are also not confined to routine meetings as in many other social clubs in the world, but they could happen everywhere, every minute on campus as well as on the Internet. With the wide variety of tailor-made as well as accidental learning opportunities, the club works so well that many students like Wayne even wished that the club would help them with

reading and writing skills needed for academic work. Because of the shaping process that this TM club experiences, we would not be surprised if it feels very different from a TM club from a different context or in a different country.

## **CONCLUSION**

Framed in an ecological perspective, this study investigated what types of affordance are available and how they work together to support autonomous language learning. Our intention was to understand the TM club through an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004): that is, recognizing the active role that the learner plays in interaction with others, utilizing artifacts in the complexity of the learning environment and emphasizing the importance of reciprocal influence and relationships among all members. Using this conceptual framework, we found the TM club supports members' English learning in a complex and interconnected way: It draws on resources not just limited to this particular community but also other TM clubs in the country and in the world. It connects language learning with its goal to maintain continuity and develop a sense of community, its leadership positions and functions, as well as its extended support systems. Learners of varied lengths of participation do perceive in their own ways a wide variety of affordances and are engaged in creative use of opportunities afforded to them. All of these lead to a deeper understanding of agentive language learning in learning communities: particularly in terms of their interconnected perception of language learning, service or leadership experience, and socializing activities. These interconnected experiences could very likely be what makes a learning community a learning community and why learners aspire to engage in the experience.

Based on the results of this study, our suggestions for language learners are to participate to the best of their abilities, tapping into the wide resources available, availing themselves of the opportunities to serve, and affordances that both the local and the larger TM communities provide. We believe the four participants' experiences could provide useful insights.

Future studies are suggested to focus on the impact of a "mother community," in this case, the TM Headquarters. It would be interesting to understand to what extent the U.S. based headquarters and other local charters with their long history and different developmental experiences

actually shape such a learning community that is situated in a different culture and on a university campus. More importantly, to what extent could this university-based learning community actually develop in a way that its own members want to see it develop? Focusing on the club members' situated experiences and the club's original US background would bring a fruitful understanding of this informal language learning experience.

The other issue that needs further investigation is the impact of service to the learning experience in such a learning community. The new member's participation and activities seem rather limited, but experienced participants were much more aware of the various affordances and were even able to create their own opportunities as they participate and serve the other members. As discussed earlier, this suggests that service plays a key role for developing identity and acquiring a fulfilling experience in the learning community. As in the participants' experience, learning and service are closely intertwined, rather than separated. More research is needed to understand how the two interact dialogically in other learning communities.

All in all, this investigation of a TM club in Taiwan makes it clear that such a learning community provides very complex and rich learning opportunities. When the TM club concept is adopted by language teachers, previous studies tended to focus only on the effectiveness of its activity structure. This study points to the fact that there is much more to the TM experience than the activity structure. It is suggested that language educators widen their perspectives and pay more attention to the other opportunities as well as challenges that come with the experience.

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#### **CORRESPONDENCE**

*Chin-chi Chao, English Department, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan  
E-mail address: cchao@nccu.edu.tw*

*Yi-ning Chen, English Department, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan  
E-mail address: yining924301519@msn.com*