

(Re)visiting a Community of Practice Evaluation Framework in a Students' Speaking Association: The Role of Sociocultural Mediators

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Abstract

Community of practice (CoP) is often seen as a practical application of sociocultural theory, as it provides a space for individuals to engage in collaborative learning and knowledge creation through social interaction and participation. Alike any other educational entity, it is critical to determine the effectiveness of any CoP program; therefore, providing a model for its evaluation becomes prominent. To do so, this study tries to explore a model by asking the staff involved in running a speaking association (SA) in a language school in Turkey to evaluate its effectiveness as a type of CoP. Hence, two administrators, three teachers, and five facilitators of the SA filled out a narrative frame about the evaluation criteria for the success and effectiveness of an SA. Then individual semi-structured interviews were conducted for closer scrutiny of the criteria and their reasons. Thematic analysis was employed with an eye on the sociocultural mediators to explore the themes of an effective CoP and the emerging themes were classified into three sociocultural mediators' categories, namely psychological, material, and peer mediators. The findings of the study can inform the policymakers and teachers of learning CoPs to integrate these aspects into their programs to produce more effective results.

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Introduction

A community of practice (CoP) refers to a group of individuals who share a common interest or profession and come together to engage in activities and exchange knowledge

related to their shared domain (Wenger, 1998). CoPs have roots in the doctrine that posits learning and knowledge creation are social activities that occur through participation and engagement within a community. CoPs can exist in various contexts, such as in workplaces, online platforms, and educational institutions (Abedini et al., 2021; Gherardi, 2009; Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013; Li et al., 2009; Magnusson et al., 1998).

Sociocultural theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). It suggests that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through their interactions with others and within the broader cultural context in which they are situated. The theory posits that learning is not an idiosyncratic process, but one occurs in a society influenced by cultural norms.

The relation between CoPs and sociocultural theory roots in the idea that CoPs provide a social context for learning and context is a core concept of sociocultural theory. CoPs are often considered a practical implication of sociocultural theory due to the fact that they engage individuals in collaborative learning and knowledge creation through social interaction and participation. Individuals can develop new knowledge and skills by sharing their existing knowledge and expertise with others in CoPs.

While the concept of CoP has been applied in various educational entities, evaluating the effectiveness of a CoP program is critical to assess its success. There are different studies exploring the evaluation criteria for the success of a CoP among which Scarso et al. (2009) stand out. They proposed a thorough framework for evaluating a success of a CoP and suggested a four-part framework.

This study aims to explore a model for evaluating a CoP program by revisiting the community of practice success framework. The study focuses on a specific CoP program, a speaking association (SA), in a language school in Turkey. The SA can be a special type of CoP program, which aims to provide a space for students to engage in collaborative learning and practice their speaking skills. What the present study attempts to add to the literature on CoP is to explore its evaluation framework in an underrepresented context, i.e. Turkey, to investigate it in the students' CoP, and to adopt a sociocultural perspective in its analysis.

Literature Review

Community of Practice (CoP) theory is usually grounded in Lave and Wenger's (1991) account of situated learning, Wenger's (1998) theory of learning as social participation, and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) work on cultivating CoPs in organizations. Across these formulations, a CoP is commonly understood as a group of people who share a domain of interest, build a community through regular interaction, and develop a shared practice over time. This perspective assumes that learning is fundamentally social

and that knowledge develops through participation in meaningful activity rather than through isolated individual acquisition alone (Kamali & Javahery, 2025).

There is substantial research on the benefits of CoPs, and recent studies continue to support these claims. In education, CoPs have been shown to support collaborative learning, skill development, teacher identity, and job satisfaction. For example, Wang and Fan's (2025) 18-month mixed-methods study of Chinese teachers found significant improvements in collaborative learning, skill development, and job satisfaction among CoP participants. Similarly, Milton et al. (2025) reported that a CoP-based professional development programme in physical education improved teachers' planning, collaboration, and understanding of motivational strategies, while Cornforth (2025) found that a university-wide inclusive pedagogy website could function as a CoP for disseminating teaching practice across academic and professional staff. Outside formal schooling, Obhi et al. (2026) found that an online green chemistry education CoP strengthened participants' sense of belonging and confidence to teach. Recent review work also suggests that CoPs remain important in discussions of organizational innovation and knowledge development (Haas et al., 2026).

At the same time, recent literature confirms that creating and sustaining CoPs is challenging. Kitto et al.'s (2025) scoping review in medical education shows that CoP cultivation depends on multiple enabling and constraining factors. Although empirical research has identified recurring barriers like time pressure, organizational culture, hierarchy, and unequal participation, recent research has also indicated the significance of facilitation, digital access, and connection to practical needs of the participants as facilitators. Recent research suggests that CoPs need to be evaluated not only for participation, creation of knowledge, and social interactions but for belonging, professional identity, self-confidence, resource use, inter-role collaborations, and practice changes. Such an expanded framework for evaluation will be in consonance with the sociocultural approach as the emphasis here is on learning through social mediation.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theory reiterates the role of social interactions in learning and development. It recognizes that individuals learn from each other through shared experiences and dialogue, and that this learning is influenced by the cultural context in which it occurs (Kozulin et al., 2003). In a CoP, members engage in collaborative activities that allow them to transfer knowledge and skills among members, and lead to the development of a shared understanding of the practices of the community which shows how appropriate it can be to act as a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of a CoP.

The role of the sociocultural theory in second language acquisition has been highlighted by recent developments within this field of study (Kamali et al., 2025; Lantolf et al., 2024; van Compernelle, 2024). For instance, the works of Lantolf et al. (2024), who illustrate

the enduring relevance of SCT within the study of SLA, as well as van Compernelle (2024), who stresses the significance of the interactive nature of mediation, confirm this point. Likewise, the research of Rosborough et al. (2024) reveals that mediational means can also involve embodied and semiotic tools such as pointing gestures, thereby indicating that learning occurs both through language and through multi-modal participation. The above-mentioned sources confirm that SCT can be used as an appropriate theoretical framework for the evaluation of a CoP.

In addition, sociocultural theory highlights the use of context in shaping learning and development (Glăveanu, 2020) by arguing that learning is not a mere idiosyncratic process. The context of a CoP in which the community operates will impact the learning and development of its members (Wenger, 1998). Thus, it is necessary to take the cultural and social context in which it operates into account.

Finally, this theory posits that learning occurs through participation in shared activities within a community of practice (Bang, 2017). Hence, it is essential to consider the level of participation of its members in order to evaluate the success of a community of practice.

Mediation tools which refer to the various physical and symbolic tools used to facilitate communication and learning within a social context are critical aspects of sociocultural theory. These tools can take many different forms, including language, gestures, images, and cultural artifacts. The components of mediation tools in sociocultural theory include their materiality, their cultural meaning, and their role in facilitating communication and learning within a specific context. There are three major types of mediators including material tools, psychological tools, and other human beings (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995). Psychological mediators refer to the internal cognitive processes that are used by individuals to regulate their behavior in accordance with the cultural norms and expectations of their society. Material mediators refer to the physical objects and tools that are used by individuals in their interactions with the environment and with others. Peer mediators refer to the social interaction between individuals, which provides opportunities for learning and development. This includes interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as parents, teachers, and peers, who can scaffold learning (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020, 2023; Xi & Lantolf, 2021) and provide support.

These major mediators are the theoretical tenets of this study to evaluate a CoP. In summary, this study tries to adopt a sociocultural perspective in designing an evaluation framework for the success of a CoP. Therefore, the research question informing this study is as follows:

RQ1: What are the criteria for evaluating a CoP from the perspective of teachers, facilitators, and administrators in Turkey?

Method

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a school of languages at a Turkish university whose aim is to prepare students for a year to study their disciplines in English in their faculties. The school offers an English preparatory program in which students take intensive English courses before starting their departmental studies. As a part of their learning schedules and to enhance teamwork and cooperation, the students can join different student associations, one of which is the speaking club. This speaking club, referred to in this study as the Speaking Association (SA), was organized as an extracurricular space where students could practise English through regular speaking-oriented activities. Students' communities of practice can engage them with topics that did not draw any interest in them previously and can contribute to students' responsibility for each other's learning (Olitsky, 2007). Therefore, the students are encouraged to communicate in English around different topics to increase their speaking abilities and build higher confidence. The main contextual and mediating variables in this setting included the institutional support provided by the school, the availability of teachers and facilitators, the topics and materials used in the sessions, peer interaction, students' motivation and confidence, and the logistical organization of the club.

People involved in these clubs are in three groups. First, there is administrative staff whose duty is to take care of students' registration, presence, technical and logistical problems, and the like. The second group is teachers who run weekly sessions on weekends and provide necessary input such as vocabulary and grammar for different topics. Finally, facilitators are responsible for fostering the learning and speaking process for the students. The main roles of a facilitator include guiding students after the sessions, task management during each session, motivating participants, and managing the emotional culture of the group. The participants of the present study were two female Turkish administrative staff who were both 25 years old, five female facilitators from Turkey and Ghana with the age range of 22 to 25, and a female Iranian and two male Syrian teachers who were between 35 and 39. All participants were selected because they were directly involved in the planning, running, or supporting of the SA and could therefore provide relevant information about its evaluation.

Data Collection

To collect data for the purpose of the present study, two administrators, three teachers, and five facilitators of SA were invited to fill out a narrative frame about the criteria of success in a CoP (here an SA) in one week. The narrative frame asked them to reflect on the features of a successful SA, the challenges they observed, the forms of support needed, and the role of teachers, facilitators, administrators, and students in the process. After receiving the narratives, they were asked to attend semi-structured interviews individually to explain what they meant in their narrative frames and provide explanations and clarifications for the researchers' questions. The interviews were

conducted after the researchers had read the completed narrative frames, so that the questions could follow up on participants' written responses. The interview questions focused on participation, interaction, resources, support, motivation, challenges, and the social conditions that shaped the functioning of the SA.

In order to adhere to ethical principles, 10 participants agreed to participate in the study after being provided with information regarding the benefits of the study as well as their entitlement to withdraw from the study at any point. The study's participants were reassured that their confidentiality of personal information and identities by using pseudonyms in the study report. Additionally, the language school officials approved and were briefed on the study's objectives and methods.

Data Analysis

The theoretical underpinning of the study, which is the sociocultural mediators, is the basis for utilizing a thematic analysis to investigate the evaluation criteria for a CoP from the perspective of the ones involved in its implementation. In this study, the mediating variables were understood as psychological, material, and peer mediators. Psychological mediators included participants' motivation, confidence, attitudes, emotions, and beliefs. Material mediators included the topics, tasks, materials, physical space, and logistical arrangements used in the SA. Peer mediators included the roles of teachers, facilitators, administrators, and students in supporting participation and learning. The process of conducting a thematic analysis of narratives and interviews involves applying systematic coding procedures to identify recurring themes, categorizing them, and exploring patterns of interconnection among them (Barkhuizen, 2016).

To analyze the gathered data with an eye on sociocultural mediators, the discovered codes were extracted. The color coding was applied to psychological, material, and peer mediators as blue, green, and yellow, respectively by the first researcher. Both researchers read the codified data carefully again (having the framework in mind) and assigned them to different categories of sociocultural framework (Kozulin & Presseisen, 1995). Disagreements in coding and categorization were discussed between the two researchers until agreement was reached. After agreement on the themes and their categories, a thematic map was created by the first researcher and was checked by the second researcher to assure its clarity and representativeness. This step was taken to make the analytic procedure more systematic and transparent.

Findings

The present study drew on two sets of data to corroborate its findings. Following, the results of the applying thematic analysis on the gathered data from narrative inquiries and semi-structured interviews with an eye on sociocultural mediators are discussed.

Psychological Mediators

The first group of mediators is psychological ones which are thought to play a crucial role in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge and practices. They allow individuals to internalize the norms and expectations, and to regulate their behavior accordingly. There are six themes that emerged from the thematic analysis (Table 1).

Table 1

CoP Psychological Mediators-Related Themes

Psychological Mediators	1. Understanding needs
	2. Real-life implication
	3. Valuing the CoP
	4. Increasing sense of security and belonging
	5. Increasing sense of self-worth
	6. Lowering anxiety & fear of making mistakes

The first theme that emerged from the data in the psychological mediators' category is the "understanding needs" of the members. A facilitator discussed it in a narrative when he highlighted it as follows:

Extract 1

... seeking feedback and input from members can help the association better understand their needs, ... and adjust its strategies and activities accordingly. This can help ensure that the association is meeting the needs of its members and providing value to them, which can in turn increase their satisfaction and loyalty.

The extract clearly evidences the role of exploring the needs in the effectiveness of a CoP. The facilitator acknowledges that analyzing and addressing the needs of the CoP's members can enhance their satisfaction and loyalty.

Real life implication of what the members do in a CoP is another theme that emerged from one of the teacher's interviews.

Extract 2

Researcher: why should a topic be personalized?
Teacher: It should be personalized and ... get related to their real life because it will be more tangible and practical. I mean when they see its application in their everyday life, they feel its usefulness.

It can be seen in the extract that having implications for real life can act as a motivator for the members to be involved more in CoPs. It can obviously add to the practicality of the program and make the outcome tangible.

The third emerged theme from the data is “valuing the CoP” which deals with the value and worth the organizers of a CoP allocate to it by different means. These means are evident in one of the facilitator’s narratives extract 3 illuminates.

Extract 3

... speaking clubs should feel more special and precious for students who will participate in them. To do this, students should be selected by some sort of exams or duties, so not everyone can participate.

The extract illustrates how the participant thinks a CoP should be valued. She clearly indicated that assigning some entrance criteria such as exams can enhance the value of the program in members’ eyes and therefore can lead to the effectiveness of the program.

The fourth emerged theme from the data is “increasing sense of security and belonging”. This was raised in one of the facilitator’s narratives and was extended in the interview. Extract 4 is evident.

Extract 4

This can lead to increased engagement, motivation, and commitment among members, which can ultimately improve the association's effectiveness in achieving its goals.

As it is clear in the extract, the facilitator asserts that CoP to be effective needs to increase motivation and commitment. When a person is committed to a community, it most probably shows a high sense of belonging and to do that they should feel support from their peers in the society that is classified under the sense of security theme in the psychological category.

“Increasing sense of self-worth” as the fifth theme urges that the CoP members who feel special can add to the effectiveness of the program.

Extract 5

... the productivity of speaking clubs may increase and selected students feel special and can be more eager to learn and speak.

Sense of self-worth refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their own value and worth as a person. For a CoP to be effective and successful, one of the facilitators argues, it should make the participants feel special that is it ought to contribute to enhancing the members’ self-worth.

“Lowering anxiety & fear of making mistakes” can be categorized as the other theme under the “psychological mediators” category. One of the teachers expressed that

Extract 6

The speaking club was successful since many of the participants expressed that they got rid of the anxiety they had before starting the speaking club. They also said they had made friends with each other and continued their relationship even after the speaking club, for speaking and social reasons.

In the same vein, the other teacher added:

Extract 7

... and thereby they became less afraid of speaking English ... the feeling that it is ok to make mistakes.

As it can be inferred from extracts 6 and 7, the data extracted under this theme are vis-à-vis “foreign language classroom anxiety” and “risk-taking” (Horwitz et al., 1986; Oxford, 1994). The teachers argued that lowering anxiety and promoting a risk-taking spirit in a CoP can be beneficial for its members.

Material Mediators

The second group of mediators, i.e. material, are factors in the environment that influence and shape human behavior and cognition. These factors can include physical objects, technology, and cultural artifacts, which mediate our interactions with the world and affect the way we think and behave. There are five themes that emerged from the thematic analysis (Table 2).

Table 2

CoP Material Mediators-Related Themes

Material Mediators	1. Training the staff
	2. Selecting appropriate topics & questions
	3. Being regular & scheduled
	4. Conducting Entrance exams
	5. Preparing proper guidelines with planning and tracking

The first emerging theme from the data in the material mediators’ category is “training the staff”. It was prominent in one of the facilitator’s interviews when she declared

Extract 8

... all ... who will be teaching or instructing at speaking clubs must get some sort of training.

And it was expanded in her interview as follows:

Extract 9

Researcher: What sort of training do you mean?

Facilitator: Like how to help learners with different issues like psychology or others. Or how to improve their confidence or motivation.

As it was pointed out in the narrative and then expanded in the interview, the facilitator posits that without training the members, a CoP cannot be effective. This is classified in the material category as long as training almost comes with materials such as digital tools assessment, guidelines, and the like.

“Selecting appropriate topics & questions” is obviously an important element in recruiting interest in the task. It is the second criterion that emerged from the data asserted by one of the teachers.

Extract 10

... topics should be selected according to their interests because this way they are more eager to participate. For example, boys are interested in football more than girls. So if everyone in the class [is] boys this is a good topic but if you have girls in the class it most probably doesn't get enough talk from them ... I think we adjusted the topics and questions along the process.

The extract evidently shows how topics and even the questions asked by the teachers can elicit talk from the learners which is the ultimate goal of such a CoP. It is needless to say that effective CoPs engage the members immensely in their activities and practices.

“Being regular and scheduled” is another theme stated very shortly by one of the administrators and classified under the material category. Extract 11 deals with this point.

Extract 11

A successful CoP is regular and scheduled.

To delve into what the staff meant by this, she was asked to elaborate on it in the semi-structured interview. The interview went on as the following.

Extract 12

Researcher: Can you elaborate on “being regular and scheduled”? ... What do you mean by it?

Administrator: I mean they shouldn't be here for one module (2 months). It should be done over a year or even years until they become fluent in it. Or sometimes the classes are canceled because of the problems of the teachers or facilitators. It shouldn't happen.

As extract 12 illustrates, the administrative staff believes that it is necessary to have a clear plan for a CoP. As effective programs have clear specific objectives which can impact the learning of the members (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2009), CoPs should follow the same route.

A stereotype of material in an educational setting is the exam which is stated by one of the facilitators of the program in her narrative. Extract 13 is evident.

Extract 13

To do this, students should be selected by some sort of exams ... so not everyone can participate. By doing this, the productivity of speaking clubs may increase and selected students feel special and can be more eager to learn and speak.

The extract overtly reveals the importance of a selection procedure and materials for entering the CoPs such as exams. The facilitators went on to suggest two benefits for this. First, it can add to the productivity of the CoP, most probably by accepting the ones that have motivation and potential and can push each other. Second, as already discussed in the “increasing sense of self-worth” section, it can add to the value the members hold for the program and themselves.

The last extracted theme from the data in the “material mediators” category is “preparing proper guidelines with planning and tracking” which deals with having a clear, easy-to-follow job description. It was shortly mentioned in one of the facilitators' narratives.

Extract 14

Have a proper guideline because success comes with planning and tracking.

In a semi-structured interview, the facilitator provided some examples of guidelines and explained how tracking can occur.

Extract 15

Researcher: What do you mean by guidelines? And why do we need it?

Facilitator: I mean everyone should know what we want from them. Not only teachers but also students. For example, how many hours they should study a day, or for example if they don't do their homework this kind or that kind of punishment they take.

It is clear from the extract that clarification and operational definitions are keys to an effective CoP. The participant implies that not knowing the job description by any member of the CoP can lead us to chaos which ends in counter-productivity.

Peer Mediators

The last group of mediators, i.e. peers or other human beings, are factors in the environment that influence and shape human behavior and cognition. Peers are not just passive influences on an individual's development; instead, they actively engage with learners and scaffold their learning experiences. Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis in this category (Table 3).

Table 3

CoP Peer Mediators-Related Themes

Peer Mediators	1. Promoting a sense of community
	2. Working together towards a common goal
	3. Being open to different contributions coming from students
	4. Cooperating with a supervising academician
	5. Promoting teamwork, communication, cooperation & collaboration

As the name suggests, CoP is a community with a common goal; therefore, it seems vital for its members to develop a “sense of community” in them. One of the facilitators discussed it in the following extract.

Extract 16

... strong communication and collaboration among members can help create a sense of community and foster a positive and supportive environment.

A sense of community is a valuable tool to encourage CoP members to be involved more in its activities and practices. As it can be seen from the extract, it can promote a positive and supportive environment which seems critical for a CoP to live.

Another common feature of the CoPs is a common goal. CoPs are formed because of a goal shared by all the members of it and that CoPs help the members to move toward it. This emerged from a facilitator's narrative.

Extract 17

Members should be willing to work together towards a common goal and support each other's efforts. Having a collaborative culture is essential for the success of a student association because it fosters a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility among members...

As it is pointed out by the participant, “members should be willing to work together towards a common goal” which shows how important a common goal can be. This is what defines a CoP and it is a critical element for the success of it.

Students as a member of a students’ association are sometimes neglected and their opinion, needs, wants, and even rights are not considered. In his narrative, one of the teachers argued that for a CoP to be successful, it should be open to students’ opinions.

Extract 18

If a students’ association wants to be successful, it should be open to different contributions coming from students because each student has a fairly long experience in learning and they would know the things that were beneficial or not.

As the extract reads, the reasons for doing so derive from the life experience of students acting as a valuable source for the effectiveness of a CoP. Every individual has a life experience, life view, and ideologies that can open new aspects of a CoP, the ones which might be neglected by the other members.

Applying the theory into practice has always been a utopian aspect of science. This is a theme elicited from a narrative of a teacher who holds a view that a lack of theory can cause the failure of a CoP.

Extract 19

A students’ association should work in cooperation with a supervising academician since they may sometimes fail to organize events in a good way

This view was expanded in the interview when the teacher elaborated on the issue.

Extract 20

Researcher: What kind of cooperation do you exactly mean?

Teacher: I mean for example choosing the best method for the specific students of our speaking club based on their needs with the help of our faculty members ... or asking them to observe us and give us comments.

It is implied from the extract that the theory-driven practice is the one encouraged by the teacher in this theme and is believed to have benefits for the CoP members.

The last theme that emerged from the data is from a teacher who argued that promoting teamwork can have tangible benefits for a CoP.

Extract 21

If a students' association wants to be successful, it should have collaborative culture that encourages teamwork and cooperation ... because it fosters a sense of teamwork ...

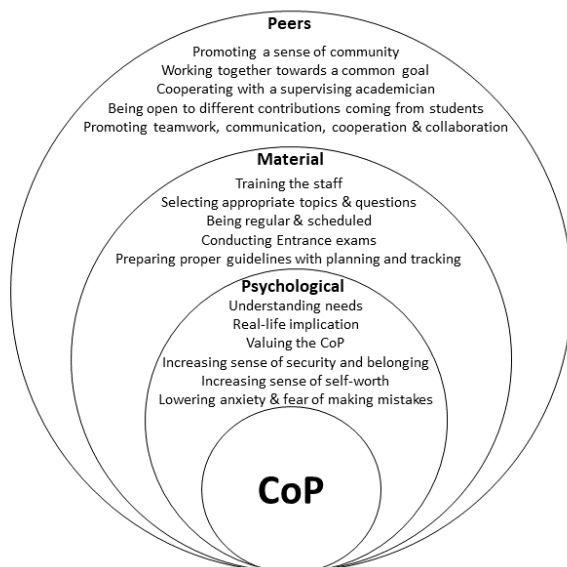
As it is explained in the extract, teamwork, and cooperation, which are derived from collaborative culture can act as an indicator of the effectiveness of a CoP. The collaborative spirit is the one that should be encouraged in the CoPs.

Discussion

The findings of the present study suggest a sociocultural framework for evaluating a CoP based on three major mediators: psychological, material, and peer mediators. Framework consists of 16 themes emerging from the narrative frames and follow-up semi-structured interviews with two administrators, three teachers, and five facilitators of a student Speaking Association (SA) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A CoP Evaluation Framework Based on Sociocultural Mediators



The framework helps move the discussion beyond a descriptive list of evaluation criteria. It suggests that evaluating a CoP requires attention not only to what participants do, but also to why they participate, how participation is mediated, and under what psychological, material, and social conditions the community becomes meaningful for its members. This is consistent with the central assumption of sociocultural theory that learning does not occur as an isolated individual process, but is shaped through social interaction, cultural context, and mediation (Kozulin et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). It is also in line with CoP theory, which views learning as participation in a shared domain, community, and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Psychological mediators are the first category of the mediators which indicate that the success of the SA could not be interpreted by simply considering observable participation and language use. In addition, participants' needs, values, anxiety, safety, belongingness, and self-respect were other elements highlighted in the process. It is worth mentioning here that the importance of this finding lies in the nature of the speaking-oriented CoP where participants are required to reveal themselves by using language. In such a situation, although participants may be aware of the language use, they would prefer to abstain from participation without feeling safe, valuable, and attached to the community.

This finding adds a critical layer to the understanding of CoPs. Wenger's (1998) view of learning as social participation suggests that individuals develop through engagement in a community. However, the present study shows that participation itself is mediated by emotional and cognitive conditions. In other words, students do not participate only because a community exists; they participate when the community responds to their needs, reduces anxiety, and gives them a sense of belonging and self-worth. From a sociocultural perspective, these psychological mediators are not simply internal qualities of individual learners. They are shaped by the social and cultural conditions of the SA, including the way teachers, facilitators, administrators, and peers organize and support participation.

The second group of mediators, material mediators, included topics and questions, training guidelines, exams, schedules, and other tools that shaped the operation of the SA. These findings show that a CoP is not sustained by social interaction alone. It also depends on the materials, routines, and organizational structures that make participation possible. This point is closely related to sociocultural theory because mediation tools are central to learning and development. As Kozulin and Presseisen (1995) explain, material tools are among the major mediators through which individuals interact with their environment and with others. In the case of the SA, topics, questions, guidelines, exams, and schedules were not neutral details; they influenced what kind of participation could happen and how the community could be evaluated.

The role of material mediators also explains why some CoPs may be more effective than others even when they share similar goals. If the topics are not meaningful to students, speaking may become mechanical rather than communicative. If the schedule is not manageable, participation may decrease even among interested students. If guidelines are unclear, teachers and facilitators may implement the sessions differently, leading to inconsistency. Therefore, material mediators should be evaluated not only in terms of whether they exist, but also in terms of how they support or limit participation. This extends the discussion of CoP evaluation beyond general categories such as participation, knowledge creation, and social interaction (Wenger et al., 2002), because it shows that participation itself depends on the quality of the tools and structures available in the community.

One important issue in this category is the role of exams. In the present study, exams were viewed as one of the material mediators that could help filter candidates and graduates of the program. This finding requires careful interpretation. On the one hand, exams may help the SA clarify expectations and make decisions about students' readiness. On the other hand, if exams become too dominant, they may weaken the voluntary, collaborative, and developmental nature of a CoP. Therefore, exams should not be treated as simply positive or negative. Their value depends on how they are used and whether they serve the goals of the community. From a sociocultural perspective, assessment becomes useful when it mediates development rather than merely controls participation.

The third group of mediators, peer mediators, reflects the social foundation of both CoP theory and sociocultural theory. As shown in Figure 1, this category included a sense of community, a common goal, academician advice, students' opinions, teamwork, communication, cooperation, and collaboration. These findings show that the SA was not evaluated only through individual learning gains, but through the quality of relationships and interactions among the people involved. This is consistent with the idea that CoPs are built around a shared domain, a community, and shared practice (Wenger et al., 2002). It also reflects the sociocultural view that learning occurs through interaction with others, including more knowledgeable others who can scaffold development (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020, 2023; Xi & Lantolf, 2021).

The importance of peer mediators explains how the SA functioned as a learning community. Teachers provided language input and pedagogical support; facilitators guided participation, managed tasks, and supported the emotional culture of the group; administrators created the logistical conditions for the association; and students contributed through their engagement, opinions, and cooperation. The success of the SA therefore depended on the coordination of these roles. If one group did not contribute effectively, the whole community could be affected. For example, even strong facilitation might not lead to successful participation if the schedule was poorly organized, or if

students did not share a sense of common purpose. This shows that peer mediation does not work in isolation; it interacts with psychological and material mediators.

This interaction among mediators is one of the main contributions of the study. Existing CoP evaluation frameworks, such as Scarso et al.'s (2009) organizational, cognitive, economic, and technological dimensions, provide useful categories for examining the success of CoPs. However, the present study suggests that in a student language-learning CoP, evaluation also needs to focus on how learning is mediated psychologically, materially, and socially. The framework in Figure 1 therefore complements previous CoP evaluation work by adding a sociocultural explanation of why and how a CoP becomes effective. It shows that success is not only a matter of having an organization, knowledge domain, resources, or technology. It is also a matter of whether the community creates the conditions for meaningful participation.

The findings also require a critical view of CoPs. Although CoPs are often presented as positive spaces for collaboration and knowledge sharing, the present study suggests that they should not be assumed to be successful simply because they bring people together. A CoP may fail if students do not feel psychologically secure, if the materials are not appropriate, if facilitators are not prepared, if schedules are not realistic, or if communication among members is weak. Therefore, the existence of a CoP is not the same as the effectiveness of a CoP. Evaluation should examine the quality of participation, the mediating tools, the roles of different members, and the conditions that support or restrict learning. In this sense, Figure 1 should be read as a dynamic evaluation framework rather than a static list of themes.

The study has several practical implications. First, language schools that run speaking clubs or student associations should evaluate them through psychological, material, and peer mediators rather than relying only on attendance, satisfaction, or general outcomes. For example, they should examine whether students feel safe to speak, whether the topics meet students' needs, whether facilitators can manage participation, and whether students experience a sense of belonging. Second, facilitators should be trained not only to manage speaking tasks but also to support confidence, reduce anxiety, encourage cooperation, and create a positive emotional culture (Kamali, 2025). Third, teachers and administrators should regularly review the materials, schedules, topics, questions, and guidelines used in the association to ensure that they support the goals of the CoP. Fourth, students' opinions should be included in the ongoing evaluation of the SA because students are the main participants in the community and can identify what helps or prevents their engagement. Finally, evaluation should be used formatively. That is, it should help improve the SA while it is running, not only judge its success after it has finished.

However, despite all its strengths, there are certain limitations to this study as well. The research was conducted using a sample of people limited to one language school in Turkey, which affects the generalizability of the findings to other situations. Moreover, the study was done only with the administrators, teachers, and facilitators without the input of the students. Since students are the primary participants in the SA, their perspectives could provide a fuller understanding of how the CoP is experienced by learners themselves. Another limitation is that the study relied on narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. Although these methods provided rich reflective data, observations of actual SA sessions could have shown how psychological, material, and peer mediators operate in real interaction.

The study was also delimited in several ways. It focused specifically on a speaking-oriented student association in a university English preparatory program. Therefore, the proposed framework may be most relevant to language learning CoPs that aim to develop oral communication, confidence, and collaborative participation. The study was also delimited to three types of sociocultural mediators: psychological, material, and peer mediators. Other dimensions, such as broader institutional policy, digital technologies, or wider sociopolitical conditions, were not examined in depth.

Conclusion

The present study explores the evaluation framework of a CoP from the perspectives of people involved in running it such as teachers, facilitators, and administrative staff with an eye on sociocultural mediators. The results, based on thematic analysis of narrative inquiries and semi-structured interviews suggested that criteria for evaluating CoPs can be classified into three groups of mediators: psychological (6 themes), material (5 themes), and peer mediators (5 themes). The implications of this study are twofold. First, CoP policymakers and authorities can apply this framework to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. It is noteworthy to reiterate that the study was conducted in Turkey and generalizing the framework to other contexts should be done with utmost care. Second, teachers can employ this framework to evaluate their own classrooms which can be considered a type of CoP (Oliver & Olkin, 2021). It can help the teachers have a better understanding of their small CoPs and lead it toward success. Further studies can find out the criteria from people in charge of CoPs in different contexts or examine it from the perspectives of other people involved in them e.g., students.

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Ethics Declarations

World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Competing Interests

There is no conflict to declare.

Data Availability

Data are available and will be shared upon reasonable request.

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