

# An Instructional Action Learning Model for Strengthening Business Students' English Learning Community

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**Abstract:** Chinese business Students are encountering increasing challenges in utilizing English in learning the international frontier information related to their majors. Engaging students in establishing their own learning communities can be a better alternative for traditional learning methods. By proposing an instructional action learning model, this paper discusses the framework for strengthening business students' English learning community. The proposed model -- 5P Action Learning Cycle (5PALC) consists of five stages in alignment with five intervention methods: preparation (coaching), planning (goal-setting), participation (dialogue), presentation (team learning), and peer & self assessment (appreciative inquiry). 5PALC could promote team learning and dialogical communication among students, which empowered business students and gave them a higher level of sustainable leadership.

**Keywords:** Action Learning , Learning Community, Team Learning, Instructional Model

## 1. Introduction

Times give students different assignments. China Standards of English (CSE), formerly released by the Ministry of Education, P. R. China in 2018, aims to guide English teaching and learning in China to strengthen the cultivation of students' practical linguistic competence, cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence. Business students has to achieve the level of understanding general English professional materials, participating in discussions on a variety of topics, effectively conveying views and comparing and analyzing different opinions in related academic or work exchanges. This challenges students' English learning, especially business students. This generation of university students were growing up in the wave of educational transitional reform. They meet globalization and glocalization at the same time. Under such circumstance, engaging students in creating and strengthening learning communities can promote their English learning as well as other related competence, such as team work spirit, listening skills, interpersonal communication ability. In this paper, the proposed action learning model offers a practical road-map to strengthen business students' English learning community.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Action Learning

Action learning was first put forward by Revans (1982), who was asked by the National Coal Board of England to increase productivity in the mines in the 1940s. He developed an Action Learning model in 1998 and then put the model into the context of hospitals in ten hospitals in London, which proved to be a great success (Revans, 1998). Later, Revans applied the conception of action learning in the context of higher education. A prominent example was the Belgian Inter-University program (Revans, 1983). Lord Weinstock was also an ardent support of Revan's Action Learning Model and he invited Revan to design an action learning program in the General Electric Company (GEC). Thus, Revans' Action Learning Model put him in the frontier of organization learning and development (Pedler, 1997). The Australian Action Learning, Action Research Association

(Zuber-Skerritt & Passfield, 2016) distinguished action learning from action research. Despite the distinct forbears of action learning (Revans, 1978) and action research (Lewin, 1951), there were times when they overlapped with each other (Coghlan, 2010). Both of action learning and action research include active learning, systematic searching, reflective inquiry and problem-solving. The difference between action learning and action research is similar to that between learning and research. Action learning focuses on action and learning, while action research emphasizes the extended research in a theoretical basis (Zuber-Skerritt & Passfield, 2016). Action research is more rigorous and requires systematic surveys and reflection. In Zuber-Skerritt and Farquhar's (2002) words, "action research includes action learning and more" (p.104).

### 2.1.1 Definition of Action Learning

According to Revans (1983), action learning could be understood as "the most effective way to learn is by doing". It is a problem-solving process for "colleagues in adversity" and diversity to find solutions through collaborative questioning and reflective inquiry learning process from multiple perspectives. Revans (1984) claimed that the model of action learning involved six steps: 1. analysis, 2. development, 3. procurement, 4. assembly, 5. implementation, and 6. feedback/review.

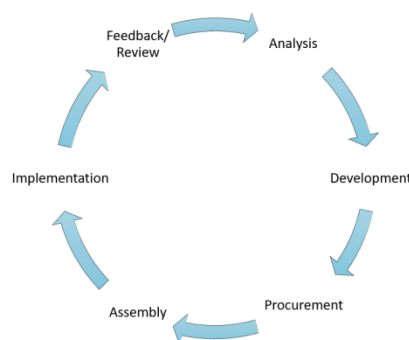
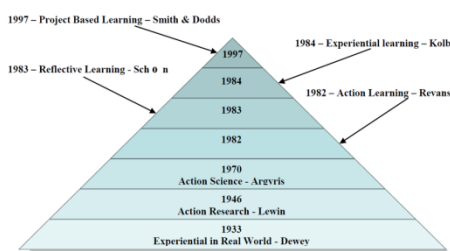


Figure 1: The Action Learning Model

Revans (1983) emphasized the last step and called it “the real crux of the whole action learning concept” (p.45). There are six interactive components in an action learning set: the problem, the group, the questioning and reflective process, the commitment to taking action, the commitment to learning, the facilitator (Marquardt, 2004). During this process, the dynamics in this group is supportive yet challenging, which bring out the best of the group members. Revans adhered to the assumption that learning consists of two components: programmed instruction and questioning insights:  $L = P + Q$  (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007). Programmed instruction alluded to programmed learning in traditional ways from books and lectures. Questioning insights were gained from asking questions properly. Then in 2004, Marquardt further added another two aspects in action learning model:  $AL = P + Q + R$  (reflection) + I (implementation). Reflection means double-checking before actually taking actions. Implementation implies taking actions after asking questions. The equation shows learning derives not only from accumulated knowledge acquisition but also from the process of applying what have been learnt. The emphasis on reflection and implementation in the action learning equation is of great significance for the development of learner autonomy. Students need to learn to ask questions at first, and then reflect about their learning process to gain new insight for the development of learner autonomy. An operational definition of action learning in this paper was defined as follows: students learn and reflect by taking actions in preparing, planning, participating, presenting and assessing their language learning projects.

### 2.1.2 Theoretical Origins of Action Learning

Action learning has a rich theoretical foundation, and researches on action learning come from different fields: business education and development, organization learning, action science and research, education, management development (Rigg & Richards, 2006).



**Figure 2: History of Action Learning**

Smith and Dodds (1997) listed out the history of action learning theory in their project-based learning theory. They put up with the project-based learning on the basis of action learning. Action learning can date back to 1930s in Dewey’s (1933) experience-centered learning theory. Then it went through Lewin’s (1946) development of action research theory and Argyris’ (1983) action science theory. Revans (1982) developed action learning and put it into great success. Schon (1983) expanded it to reflective learning. Kolb (1985) made a further research on experiential learning. To make the rationale of action learning clearer, the researcher outlined the three fundamental roots of action learning theory in the next sections.

#### a) John Dewey—Experience-emphasized Learning

Dewey (1933) pointed out that traditional classroom teaching should be diverged toward a more “experientially based education” (p.5) and altered “static aims and materials” to adopt to this continuously changing world (p.6). Revans (1998) echoed this view by claiming that the role of experience has been undervalued in the new learning environment. Dewey (1938) stated that “all genuine knowledge comes through experience” (p.33), and Revans (1998) also had a well-known statement “all learning begins in action” (p.7). Both Dewey and Revans admired scientific learning process, as Dewey (1933) introduced a five-step scientific disciplined inquiry process in his essay *How We Think*—surveying, hypothesizing, experimenting, auditing and reviewing. He laid a solid foundation for action learning by combing reflective knowledge with actual experience in an inquiry learning process. Revans (1998), who was also an advocator of the scientific process, described Action Learning as an “application of the scientific method” (p.16-17). His action learning model was described in many related literatures as the scientific model of learning (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999). In conclusion, Revans and Dewey shared two common points in their learning theory: the emphasis on action and the stress on scientific learning.

#### b) Kurt Lewin—Action Research Model

Lewin’s (1946, 1951) contribution to the creation of action research is critical (Argyris, 1976). In the 1940s, action research model contributed to the development of education, which later was described by Brooks and Watkins (1994) as “collaborative action research and action research in the schools” (p.9). Lewin (1946) put forward his cooperative problem-solving model by emphasizing participatory involvement in decision-making process and collaborative group solutions. Revans also focused on the Action Learning group’s collective wisdom (Pedler, 1997) and believed in group problem-solving capacity as a whole. The action research model put forward by Lewin (1951), known as action science, put the focus on the scientific research on the basis of valid and reliable data. At the end of each cycle after taking actions, there should be reflection about the process before next cycle begins. Revans (1998) thought highly of scientific research process and believes that learning came as a social process growing in a climate of continuous action and reflection. Both Action Research Model and Action Learning Model attended to scientific research procedures and inquiry reflection learning. Lewin’s (1946, 1951) three-step model of organizational change asserted that people’s espoused beliefs and past mental models (Senge, 1995) would hinder their innovative thinking unless they unfreezed those old assumptions first (see Section 2.1.3.1). When thinking out of the box, there was greater possibility of seeing the new perspectives. Revans (1998) also pointed out the resistance against changes came largely from people’s incapacities to jump out from the box, especially when changes meant something contradictory to their old mental paradigms and led to uncomfortable adventures to somewhere unknown. There is a comparison of Lewin’s Force Field Analysis and Revans’ Action Learning Model in terms of the initial problem-identifying stage:

**Table 1:** Comparison Models of LFFA and AL

Force Field Analysis (Lewin, 1951, p. 15)	Action Learning Model (Revens, 1998, p. 33)
What should we be happening?	What should we really be trying to do here?
What is stopping us from doing it?	What is stopping us from doing it?
What can we do?	What can we do about it?

From the chart, it is not hard to see the similarities between these two models. Revans (1998) clearly inherited some legacies of Lewin’s action science methodology in designing his action learning cycle. As aforementioned in Section 2.1.4, action research and action learning share some common understandings about organization development. Both involve systematic inquiry, planned changes through actions and continuous reflection. Active learning takes place from individual, group and organization level in both approaches.

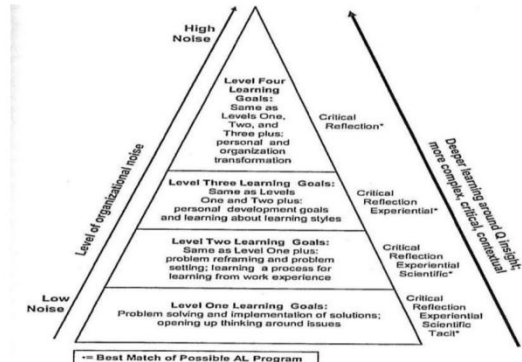
**c) Chris Argyris—Action Science**

In the 1970s, Argyris (1978) developed his action science approach on the basis of action research. Together with Putnam and Smith (1985), he made a further exploration on action science and he began to utilize action science intervention in organizations in the 1990s. Action science is another form of action research. It focuses on analyzing the contradictions between people’s actual actions and preferred intentions. A vital concept is theory-in-use that helps discover the discrepancy between what have been learnt and what have been applied (Argyris, 1976). By reflecting upon what they said or what have been applied (the results), people tend to discover theories-in-use and develop new mental models, resulting in continuous learning and reframing. Argyris (1976) illustrated in his single and double loop theory that many levels of learning took place to make organization changes. Collaborative action research and shared learning, the basic characteristics of double-loop learning, are fundamental to discover new knowledge for practice. Via double-loop learning, people create a supportive and collaborative environment with shared goals, aiming in higher personal mastery and newer mental models. Through the problem-solving process, individuals question their old unconscious assumptions and bring up new mental models (Senge, 1995); in addition, they acquire basic negotiating skills and communicative arts of getting in confrontational yet constructive dialogue with others. In summary, action learning theory finds its roots in Dewey’s experience-focused learning concept, Lewin’s (1951) action research theory and Argyris’ (1983) action science theory (single-loop and double-loop learning in particular). Moreover, the emphasis on actions, collective participation in the decision-making process, team learning and social interactions made action learning a distinctive model for the design of organization development interventions in this current research.

**2.1.3 Dimensions of Action Learning**

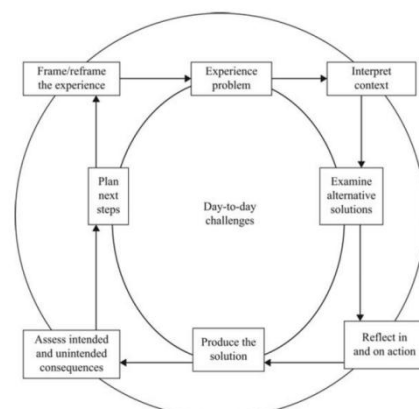
Yorks, O’Neil and Marsick (1999) believed that there were four categories of action learning: the tactic school, the scientific school, the experiential school and the critical reflection school. The tactic school believed in incidental learning during the action learning process and paid more attention to the final results. The scientific school represented by Revans attended to the approach of scientific analysis and problem solving. The experiential school had its theoretical

foundation on Kolb’s (2000) Experiential Learning Cycle and concerned more about learning from experiences and reflection. The critical reflection school was based on Schon’s (1987) “reflective practicum” (p. 38) and “action-reflection learning” developed by Watkins and Marsick (Galbraith, 1991, p.91). During the reflective learning process, there are reframing, releasing or re-interpreting of the long-held assumptions and beliefs. People are more prone to transformative learning ((Schon, 1987; Garratt, 1991).



**Figure 3:** The Pyramid Model of Action Learning

The above pyramid model was adapted by Yorks (2005) to better understand and choose the specific action learning model in specific context. Yorks (2005) claimed that as action learning moved towards the top of the pyramid, there would be more “noises” along the way (p. 189). “Noises” symbolized those resistant voices from group members when they were feeling threatened by new perspectives contrary to their current assumptions. Watkins and Marsick (1993) held that action-reflection learning could equip people with a kind of autonomy for life-long continuous learning. They developed the Continuous Learning Model to deal with day-to-day problems and challenges. Critical reflection played a vital role in the model, which, in essence, was deuterolearning—to learn how to learn. Watkins and Marsick’s (1993) Continuous Learning Model (CLM) is very practical for day-to-day learning situations. It can be applied to real-life problem-solving classroom. CLM contains two levels of learning on the basis of Argyris’s (1978) understanding of action learning from single-loop learning and double-loop learning (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007).



**Figure 4:** The continuous learning model

A distinctive feature is the emphasis of critical reflection during the learning cycle. In the continuous learning cycle, there are two opportunities for reflection. One is to reflect in

and on action before problem-solving. Another is to frame/reframe the experience after problem-solving. The 5P Action Learning Cycle in this current study also included two opportunities for reflection. In order to deliver a better presentation, it's necessary to cross-check before the presentation. And after the delivery of the presentation, students assessed their performance as well as the performance of the peers again. This echoed Lewin's (1951) emphasis on reflection before taking actions and after taking actions in his action research theory. Through retrospection of what happened during the problem-solving process, one had a better performance next time. In the classroom context, it is beneficial for students to stop to reflect about their learning process as well as their behaviors as a team, which helps to build a supportive learning environment that encourages dialogue, conversation and critical reflection. In short, to develop students' learner autonomy, it is necessary to foster reflective learning. On this basis, students, through the revisit of their learning memories and the reframing of their next learning objectives, increase their ownership and responsibility of their learning gradually, and improve their learner autonomy ultimately.

### 2.1.4 Action Learning and Adult Learning Theories

As aforementioned in Dewey's (1990) experience-based teaching pedagogy, action learning emphasizes actions and scientific learning process. It has been connected with many adult learning theories, i.e. reflection learning (Yorks, et al., 1999), situated learning (Gregory, 1994), and problem-based learning (Dotlich & Noel, 1998). Systematically, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) categorized the adult learning theories into five schools—cognitivist, behaviorist, humanist, social learning and constructivist. Action learning incorporates the elements of all these five different schools together. It fits in with them all. According to Marquardt and Waddill (2010), action learning is a methodology and an approach that emphasizes the basic commonalities among the five different schools of adult learning. Moreover, action learning has the flexibility to "utilize and synergize a wide array of diverging as well as complementary forces" from each of the five schools of adult learning theory (p.202). It meets the critical conditions required by each of the five different adult learning schools.

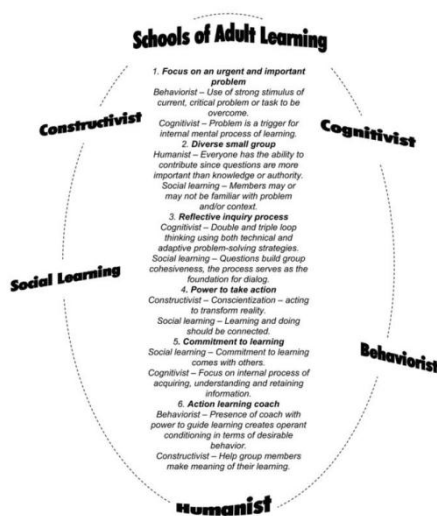


Figure 5: Action learning elements

In Marquardt's (2004) understanding of action learning, there are six components in an action learning approach: an urgent and important problems, diverse small group, reflective inquiry process, power to take action, commitment to learning and action learning coach. In Figure 13, Marquardt and Waddill (2010) illustrated an integrated picture of the general applicability of the action learning approach for the five different adult learning schools. Therefore, it is no wonder that action learning has been popularly welcomed since Revans' time. According to Frank (1996), about 12 different British universities provide 16 different postgraduate/master courses or programs based on action learning. Higher education, facing sustainability challenges of providing new approaches of teaching and learning, is responding by integrating more practical and applied experiences into the coursework design (Sadler et al., 2010; Stephens & Graham, 2008). Bourner and Frost (1996) explore participants' action learning experiences in higher education. They conclude that action learning experiences are different from those programmed lecture learning experiences as the former facilitates the growing support network and sharing learning process. Participants are learning to learn with a higher self-management of learning and learning awareness in the action learning process. Moreover, participants are expected to learn from the interactions with others (O'Hara, Webber & Reeve, 1996), which is also beneficial for students' development of the sociocultural dimensions of learner autonomy.

### 2.2 Learning Community

Learning communities emphasize continuous learning and inquiry which is much similar to organization development philosophies. Organizations respond to organizational changes through organizational learning and evolve themselves into learning organizations. Four building blocks establish the foundations of professional learning communities: mission, vision, values, and goals (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Senge's (1990) The Fifth Discipline conforms to the concept of taking schools as learner-centered strength-based learning communities, which is clearly revealed from the five principles: personal mastery, mental modes, shared vision, team learning, systems thinking. A learning community is a distinctive organization development mode, arousing more and more attention from various aspects of industries. There are a lot of works depicting a community-like learning environment: shared vision and shared leadership, cooperative team learning and close relationships (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Rogoff et al. (2001) and Wells (1999) studied learning communities from sociocultural perspectives. Sergiovanni (1992) puts one of Senge's principle – team learning, into an educational setting and he stresses the close interrelationship between community members. At the initial stage, the concept of learning community was proposed as a replacing mode of the restricted school learning environment. It focuses more on a strength-based learning style with harmonious relationship among community members with a shared vision. During the organizational learning process, organizational learning communities come into place when organization members shared common learning goals and establish a closely-knit family like relationships. Lenning and Ebbers (1999) bring up four types of learning communities in higher education settings: curricular, classroom, residential, student-type. They believe that students' learning can be maximized through

taking part in learning communities (1999, p. IV). Learning communities are featured with a shared vision, system thinking, distributed leadership and team learning (Eaker, Dufour & Burnette, 2002). When a group of people gather together using action learning model to solve a specific problem, it begins to resemble a learning team or a learning community. These two forms of learning agency are often the incentives to make organization changes and developments. In Asian culture, there is a more tendency towards interdependence and collaboration. As a group-oriented society, Chinese culture is more convenient for a group-learning or team-learning mode in terms of fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 1996). Empirical studies provide the rationale for team learning pattern in classroom. Ho and Crookall conclude that a classroom-based simulation approach in Hong Kong succeeded largely because students worked towards achievement of collective goals, as members of a team (1995, p. 237). Aoki and Smith (1996) also maintain a positive attitude towards collaborative learning considering the interdependence of Japanese cultural ingredients and the group-based nature. On the basis of previous studies, Blankenstein (2004) and other researchers from HOPE (Harnessing Optimism and Potential through Education) Foundation summed up six main principles of learning communities:

**Table 2: Six Principles**

Principle One	Common mission, vision, values, and goals
Principle Two	Ensuring achievement for all students: creating systems for prevention and intervention
Principle Three	Collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning
Principle Four	Using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement
Principle Five	Gaining active engagement from family and community
Principle Six	Building sustainable leadership capacity

Those six principles provide great insights for organization development future direction in school settings, such as collaborative teaching and learning, action-oriented classroom interventions and teacher-student relationship building. OD value—based principles of practice (respect, inclusion, collaboration, authenticity, self-awareness, empowerment) are aligned with four components of relational trust associated with professional learning communities: “respect for the importance of a person’s role and viewpoint, competence to administer one’s role, personal regard for others, and integrity in words, actions, and ethics” (Cummings & Worley, 2008, p. 664). According to Brophy (2010), if school is taken as an institution, then each classroom can be regarded as smaller learning communities featuring ongoing interpersonal relationships (p.71). In such learning communities, competition is de-emphasized and collaborative learning is emphasized (Miserandino, 1996; Turner & Meyer, 1999). Brophy (2010) noted that there are three essential principles for teachers who want to establish their classroom as a learning community:

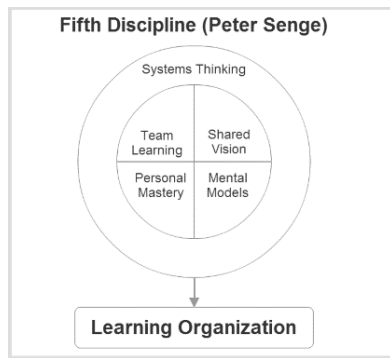
- make themselves and their classroom attractive to students;
- focus their attention on individual and collaborative learning goals and help them to achieve these goals;
- teach things that are worth learning, in ways that help students to appreciate their value (p.23).

When teachers guide their classrooms as learning communities, students will be offered a certain autonomy

over their learning and be involved in the decision-making process about their learning resources or learning formats. Teachers facilitate students’ understanding of systems thinking—to regard the class as an integrated whole and begin to build a shared vision of learning better together (Wilson, 2001). Team learning takes place as a natural sequence when students feel more connected with the classroom community (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). They develop tolerance of multiple perspectives through continuous negotiation of meaning, improve their learning via skillful discussion, dialogue, and knowledge sharing (Senge, 1990, 1994). During the whole learning process, students shake off the old mental modes of old competition-driven classroom learning, which contributes to the development of a more positive and supportive learning climate (Senge, 1990, 1995; Schmuck, 1976, 2001). Therefore, the proposed model focuses on team learning and positive relationship building between students and between students and teachers. Through the practice of the proposed model, students are expected to build learning teams together, then learning community together.

### 2.3 Learning Organization (LO)

Organizations, because they consist of human beings, allegorically can be expected to learn (Wilson, 1989). Sirotnik (1998) insists that organizational changes in education occur among people rather than structures. In such a world full of challenges and opportunities, those who can build the learning capacities of employees can better be aligned with the increasingly competitive and changing context of the 21st century. In response to organizational changes and environmental changes rapidly and efficiently, one way is to build a learning organization (Senge, 1990, 1995). Senge (1995) claims that learning organization is more a conception and vision in our mind bearing continuous and life-long learning in mind than a real organization with all necessary structures and subsystems. In Senge’s (1995) words, “great teams are learning organizations” (p. 17). In this current research, students were expected to build autonomous learning teams. According to Senge (1990), there are basic five principles of learning organizations which are clearly demonstrated with a circular structure. Personal mastery is gained from personal growth and learning (p.141). Mental models are deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting (p. 174). In a learning organization, shared vision is the vision that organization members want to create together (p.206). Team learning refers to the ability to think insightfully about complex issues, to act in innovative and coordinated ways and to play different roles on different teams (p.236). Systems thinking enables members to see wholes, to see interrelationships instead of things and to see patterns of change rather than static “snapshots” (p.68). Senge (1995) focuses on learning from collective aspiration via systems thinking—to understand the system as a whole instead of considering it as individual different parts.



**Figure 6: The Five Disciplines**

Taking Senge's learning organization as a blueprint, the five principles should be taken into account in building a learning class to promote students' learner autonomy in this current research. Systems thinking show them learning is a continuous loop process, it is a process made up of circulatory action learning cycles. One has to evaluate and reflect about the learning process continuously. Personal mastery emphasizes the significance of self-learning and self-development. Learner autonomy improves one's self-learning awareness and self-management ability. Mental model determines what a person sees and how a person sees. So, students may come out of their comfort zones and be more aware of the learning process. Team learning enables students to learn from open discussions and knowledge sharing. The sociocultural perspective of learner autonomy asks for team learning and social interaction in the class. From the study of previous literature reviews, it can be seen that fostering students' learner autonomy should focus on creating a learner-centered classroom with features of collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, interactive communication, open dialogue and reflective thinking. All these find resonance in Senge's (1994) learning organization theory and Argyris' (1976) single-loop and double-loop learning. A learning organization marries students with high academic performance, also, it enables students to embrace changes and to become more adaptive to the increasing competitive world. Through the deep learning cycles activated by double-loop learning, students develop new skills and capabilities, awareness and sensibilities, then they go through fundamental shifts of minds individually and collectively. Learning organization is a description of organizational state with learning internalized as an attribute; while organization learning depicts the learning process of an organization as a collective entity with continuous sense-making and development. Argyris and Schon (1996) claim that a learning organization is constantly involved in the adapting interaction with the environment. Organization learning (OL) is a change process that seeks to enhance an organization's capability to acquire and develop new knowledge. It is aimed at helping organizations use knowledge and information to change and improve continually (Cummings & Worley, 2008). Cohen and Sproull (1996) claim there are three types of organization learning: procedural organization learning, declarative organization learning and inter-relational organization learning. They further distinguish organization learning from traditional organization learning in three aspects: action-directed, dynamics-focused and organization-oriented. Levitt and March (1988) claim that organization learning is a useful way to describe organizational change. Huber (1991,

1996), Levitt and March (1988) and Senge (1990, 1995) describe organization learning from three dimensions: learning personally and directly, learning indirectly (from others or from imitations of others) and learning from collective memory of the organization as a whole. Huber (1991, 1996) claims that knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation and organizational memory contribute to organization learning. Cohen and Sproull's (1996) three types of OL, Levitt and March's (1988) three dimensions of OL and Huber's (1991, 1996) four procedures of OL have consistent internal logics. Knowledge acquisition can be obtained through self-study, action research and imitation or grafting. It is action-oriented and people learn from direct experiences. Information distribution concerns interpersonal communications, and the interpretation of the information varies from person to person due to their different mental modes. It is relationship-dependent and people learn from indirect experiences. Organization memory is similar to Senge's (1995) systems thinking—to connect knowledge acquisition, information distribution and information interpretation as an organic whole, which is organization-oriented and learning comes from the collective memory of the organization. In summary, organization learning stresses action, communication and collaborative learning. Argyris and Schon (1978) advocate learning from action, interpersonal communication and collaboration in the single-loop and double-loop learning. Learner autonomy and communicative competence are capabilities that need to be fostered in an action-oriented communicative environment, so the author adopted single-loop and double-loop learning in this current research. In the next section, single-loop and double-loop learning will be illustrated in details respectively.

### 3.The Proposed Model -- 5P Action Learning Cycle (SPALC)

Senge (1995) maintains that language learning is much akin to loop learning in circulated cycles when he compares systems thinking to a language. In other words, he believes learning a language can facilitate one's systems thinking; and learning a language is better directed in a circulated way with reflection and reframing for future development. Lu (2015) compares ODI to a reflective learning process in which one tends to modify his views and actions no matter whether he/she is involved in a single-loop learning or a double-loop learning.



**Figure 7: 5P Action Learning Model**

The 5P Action Learning Model consists of Preparation, Planning, Participation, Presentation and Peer/Self-assessment. It is created by the researcher based on Work Cycle (Legenhausen, 2003) and CALLA (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The preparation phase refers to students'

searching for project-related materials and goal-oriented resources. The planning phase refers to students' organization of materials as well as the design of their projects and realizable learning goals. The participation phase refers to the involvement in decision-making of every team members and the skillful discussion among them, as well as the negotiation between teachers and students. The presentation phase three modes of communication—presentational, interpretative and interpersonal, students learn both listening skills and communication skills. The peer/self-assessment refers to reflection of themselves as learners and the language learning process; after the critical reflection of the previous action learning cycle, students reframe their learning experiences as an individual, as a team and as a learning community member.

### 3.1 Origins of 5P Action Learning Cycle Model (SPALC)

The rationale of the proposed model will be discussed in the following sections accordingly. The main theoretical origins are the Work Cycle Model (Legenhausen, 2003) and CALLA (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

#### 3.1.1 Work Cycle

According to Benson (2001), there are six approaches to developing learner autonomy in classroom settings. They are resource-based approach, technology-based approach, curriculum-based approach, teacher-based approach, learner-based approach, and classroom-based approach. To foster learner autonomy in English classrooms, learners should be put into the first priority; and since the group dynamics in the classroom not only responds to the interactions between students and between students and teachers, but also adapts to the changing context of the larger school environment, the classroom group dynamics should be taken into careful consideration (Schmuck, 2001). In this paper, the classroom-based approach and the learner-based approach were integrated into 5P action learning cycle. There are a great number of studies on the classroom-based approach and the learner-based approach of fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Dam, 1995; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Grima, 2000; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Legenhausen, 2003, 2010; Rivers, 2001; Rubin, 1975; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 2002). Work Cycle is a learner-centered as well as a classroom-based learning approach. There are three guiding principles of the Work Cycle (Legenhausen, 2003). The first underlying assumption is to regard language learning as a creative construction process between learners and between learners and teachers. Students are proactive learners rather than receptive ones. The second guiding principle is social interaction between learners and between students and teachers. Those interactions are much similar to that authentic communication in the target language culture (students act and speak as themselves in the English classroom in accordance with their respective roles, Dam, 2011, p.44). And the third procedure principles are demonstrated in the Work Cycle. Considering the basic three main principles of the Work Cycle, the researcher identified its appropriateness to be applied in this current research to improve students' learner autonomy and communicative competence.

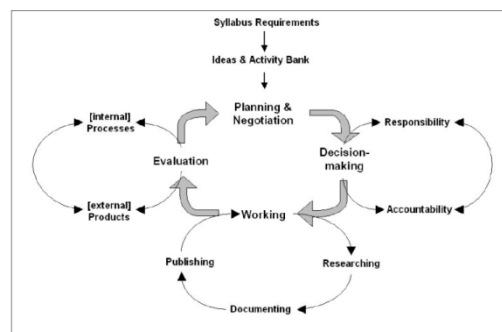


Figure 8: Work Cycle

As Figure 8 shows, the Work Cycle contains four phases—Planning & Negotiating, Decision-making, Working and Evaluation. The cycle begins with the Planning & Negotiating stage, which integrates a dialogic learning process into the cycle. It is applicable in both syllabus-restricted classroom and syllabus-loose classroom because students can resort to the Ideas & Activity Bank, where students can find valuable resources from it if they have no clue. Free choices go hand in hand with the decision-making process, where students take full responsibility for their own learning. After that, in the working phase, students are required to document their learning processes and results. Documenting, as a double-loop learning process itself, involves critical reflection in the pushed output writings. Moreover, it makes the learning processes explicit and transparent to oneself and to others, which is identical to the language acquisition procedures. The last phase is evaluation, which involves students' evaluation of their learning process and results at frequent intervals. Constant evaluation can sustain students' learning enthusiasm and motivate their innovation through critical reflection.

#### 3.1.2 Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)

The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) intends to provide supplementary support for students learning English in content-based classes (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). As an instructional system, CALLA is designed to develop the academic language learning skills and strategies of the ESL/Bilingual students (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The main principle of CALLA is its emphasis on learning strategies. The CALLA lesson plan model contains five stages: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion.

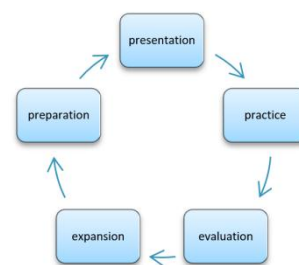


Figure 9: CALLA

It is a framework beneficial for the academic development of students' content-based English learning (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Strategy-based Instruction (SBI) emphasizes the importance of imparting learning strategies and learning skills to students. According to Chamot &

O'Malley (1994), there are three major learning strategies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. As learner autonomy requires the acquisition of a lot of metacognitive knowledge and metalinguistic strategies, this study integrates the CALLA framework into the conceptual framework.

### 3.2 The Rationale of Using 5P Action Learning Cycle for Education Interventions

The design of 5P Action Learning Cycle incorporates Little's (2004) three pedagogical principles of learner autonomy into practice: learner empowerment, learner reflection and the target language use (p. 119). Participation in the decision-making process and preparation of the project enables students to learn collaboratively and share learning responsibility together (Dam, 2011). And it's also a reflection process involving all participants' introspection. The target language use is something combining autonomous language learning and autonomous language use together, for the inherent characteristics of language requires continuous language use in interactional contexts. Moreover, the design of 5P Action Learning Cycle integrates social interaction into classroom application and develops it into team learning (Benson, 2001; Dam, 1995; Little, 2004; Voystgy, 1978). Theoretically, Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory advocates interpersonal communication and interaction (Shamir, 2013). Students tend to learn through peer interaction and discussion, which is a rule embraced by the theory of learning community. Dam and Legenhausen (2011) claim that language learning is creatively constructed through communicative interactions authentically among students and between students and the teacher. The authenticity of classroom interactions in small teams, the operational principle of the autonomous learning environment, allows students to grow "a strategic competence for intentional learning" (Legenhausen, 2003). Although there are restrictions with syllabus requirements, students are allowed a certain level of autonomy, which finds resonance in Littlewood's "negotiated versions of autonomy" (1999, p.72). In an action learning cycle, there were two opportunities for peer cross-checking. One was before the presentation stage and another is after the presentation stage. The Student Classroom Committee held meetings to discuss, analyze and evaluate the learning processes regularly. This procedure found its rationale in the Continuous Learning model and in Dam's (1995) autonomous learning classroom. Legenhausen (2003) also emphasized the benefits of documenting one's learning processes and making it open to the class, the teacher and the parents. Many researchers claim that the key to successful language learning lies in the authentic target language use in social interactional environments (Atkinson, 2011; Ellis, 2003; Dam, 1995; Gass, 2003; Legenhausen, 2003; Little, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Spolsky, 1989). The teacher encourages students to communicate with each other in English during the class time. Through the dialogic construction of English learning, students are engaged in deeper language processing with greater mental effort than just passively listening without responses. In addition, having conversions and dialogues with team members and classmates make the learning process explicit and transparent, which corresponds to a language acquisition point of view (Legenhausen, 2003; Senge et al., 1994). As writing can help clear the learning thoughts, interactional communication between team members and

classmates contribute to a more limpid learning clue. The increasing writing or speaking impetus also generates more pushed output of the target language (Legenhausen, 2003). Many researchers stress the importance of language output in the language acquisition process (Swain, 1981; Benson, 2003). Besides a medium of communication, language also works as a means for metacognitive reflection and metalinguistic reflection in learning management, in other words, it is an instrument of thought (Little, et., 2017). Little (2004) stresses learner reflection in his three pedagogical principles of fostering learner autonomy in a language classroom. This study aims at increasing students' learner autonomy and communicative competence during the learning cycle, which demands constant reflection and evaluation (Dam, 2011; Legenhausen, 2011). So, using English as the basic communication language hit the point. It synchronized with the teaching plans of DCE, and the materials from the textbook provided inspirations for students in terms of their projects. Projects of the 5P action learning cycle could be presented in various kinds of forms, such as writings (poems, short stories, comments), oral presentations, or a show.

### 3.3 The Process of 5PALC

A typical 5P action learning cycle consists of five phases—preparation for the learning materials; planning for the learning objectives; participation in the decision-making and project doing; presentation of the project work; peer & self-assessment of one's own project and others' works with critical reflection (Dam, 2006; Little, 2004). After analyzing the theoretical origins and rationale of 5PALC, the next section focuses on the process of 5PALC. In each phase, there is appropriate organization development intervention—coaching, goal-setting, dialogue, team building and appreciative inquiry. Each intervention is interconnected with one another in improving students' learner autonomy.

#### 3.3.1 Preparation—Coaching

The cycle began with the preparation stage. Before this stage, students were provided with a coaching session to prepare themselves for new concepts—LO, OL, AI, 5PALC, LA and CC. Moreover, Preparation phase referred to students' searching for project-related materials and goal-oriented resources. Preparation derives from CALLA model ((Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). There are five stages in a CALLA model: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion. In an action learning cycle, preparation mainly referred to the reflection on the past learning experiences and the preparation for future learning projects. By connecting the prior knowledge with the present task, students recalled and re-evaluated the previous knowledge, absorbing precious and useful experiences. The Preparation stage, a brainstorming stage of students as well as a forming phase for teams among students, was also a transition stage from past learning to a new learning cycle. Students unlearned and relearned in this phase. By revisiting the past learning experiences, students could set up more practical learning goals in new learning journeys.

#### Coaching

Whitmore (1992) says: "Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them" (p.10). In this current research, the Nested-levels model developed by New Ventures West (Weiss, 2004) was adopted. The nested model



began by seeing what you are “doing”, then it focused on how you are “learning” and ended up with who you are—“the way of being or becoming”. The last phase happened at an ontological level by deciphering oneself and the world around him.



Figure 10: Nested-level model

In this research, coaching was to help students figure out their current level of English learning, their English learning process and themselves as English learners. It was important for students to find out their blind spots and reflect about their learning process to build the internal capacity and competence of English learning. The Nested-levels model corresponds to this English learning process and was chosen by the researcher to foster students’ metacognitive awareness.

**3.3.2 Planning—Goal-setting**

The second stage was Planning. It required students to set up short-term objectives and long-term goals for their English learning. During this stage, students were expected to make learning plans, organize the learning materials and design their projects. By collective planning, students needed to have dialogues and discussions with team members, and in some occasions, they had to negotiate with the teacher about the project. Planning derives from the “Planning & Negotiating” from the Work Cycle (Legenhausen, 2003). There are four stages in the Work Cycle: Planning & Negotiating, Decision-making, and Working and Evaluation. In this current research, students had to make specific plans for the project. The priority was to set up collective learning objectives, which involved goal setting. Goal setting was a critical beginning for a new action learning cycle. The key was to select suitable learning goals, formulate goal statement and design measurable results (whether one had achieved the goal or not). Then, team members also had to set up basic norms and a specific time schedule for the project. On the basis of the collective learning objectives and team norms, team members differentiated roles and assigned different tasks in the participation of collective decision-making.

**Goal Setting**

Goal setting refers to the process of specifying realistic attainable goals by focusing members’ behavior in the direction of the goals (Locke, 1990). Goal Setting theory, in its earliest statement, is interpreted as not only influencing monetary incentives, but also affecting results and performance in a certain period of time (Locke, 1968).

Table 3: SMART Goals Worksheet

S	Specific What do you want to accomplish?
M	Measurable How will you know when you have accomplished your goal?
A	Achievable What are the actions and resources I need to achieve the goal?
R	Relevant Is the goal in line with my long-term objectives?
T	Time-bound How long will it take to achieve the goal?

In the current study, the researcher introduced the SMART ((Locke & Latham, 1990) goal setting model to students. SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. Students had to set up realizable goals, short-term or long-term. First, students had to select a goal to work on. Second, students needed to figure out the essential resources and support to achieve the goal. Thirdly, a time schedule for specific steps was required. Fourthly, students should establish checkpoints to see their progress. Finally, measurable results were necessary to check whether one has achieved the goal. Students could set up smaller learning objectives in each learning cycle for a bigger goal in the semester.

**3.3.3 Participation—Dialogue**

The third stage was Participation. In this stage, students were participating in the decision-making and preparation of the project via interactive dialogues and skillful discussions (Ross, 1994). Team building played a vital role in this stage. After making specific learning plans and being assigned different tasks in a team, students were all involved in the learning process. Participation evolves from the practice stage of CALLA (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994). As shown in the Continuous Learning Model, there is a necessity of reflecting in and on action before delivering the presentation of the project. Collaborative team learning is a basic form of participation. The dialogic action learning process involves students’ active engagement and self-expression. It is crucial for students to share different perspectives along the learning process. They can cross-check their errors, identify alternative solutions and interpret the sociocultural context together. Reflecting while learning fosters the development of learner autonomy in this stage.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is a kind of organizational learning intervention, which involves participants together to have open discussion about something so that they can realize their differences and change their perceptions and behaviors to increase their group performance (Senge, 1995). An operational definition in this current study of dialogue is the communication between teachers and students when choosing a specific project and the open group interaction among team members and among different teams. Many researchers agree that dialogue contributes to individual and organization learning (Argyris, 1982; Barge, 2002; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993). Walton (1999) maintains that there are six types of dialogues: persuasion dialogue or critical discussion, negotiation, inquiry, deliberation, information seeking dialogue and personal quarrel. He believes that persuasion dialogue or critical discussion can benefit both parties. Empathy, open-mindedness and critical doubt can make the learning process transparent. Moreover, listening is also an important part of dialogue, during the listening process, one needs to adhere to these nine rules (Ross, 1994): stop talking to others and to yourself; imagine the other person’s view point; look, act and be interested; observe nonverbal language (i.e. body language); do not interrupt; listen between the lines for both implicit and explicit meanings; speaking only affirmatively while listening; to rephrase key points of what the other person said; stop talking. In this paper, dialogic action learning was the fundamental structure, which corresponded to the negotiation of meaning in language pedagogy (Legenhausen, 2003; Little, 2004). The negotiation of

meaning between students and between students and the teacher required dialogues and skillful discussions. Through open dialogues and skillful discussions in the class committee meeting, students made their learning process explicit and transparent, which was of vital importance in promoting learner autonomy and communicative competence.

### 3.3.4 Presentation—Team building

Presentation is derived from CALLA (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) and it resembles "Working" in the Work Cycle model (Legenhausen, 2003). During this stage, the presenting group had to deliver the result of their project and the process of developing their project. At the stage of Presentation, students were given opportunities to go through three modes of communication—presentational, interpretative and interpersonal communication. Both the development process and the delivery process required team learning and collaborative efforts. Team roles were cautiously differentiated and tasks were carefully assigned and the project work could reflect their team learning process to a large degree. As for the listeners, they were meant to listen carefully with multiple listening skills; moreover, their interpretations of other teams' projects reflected their distinct constructive processes. When they were having discussions in groups of three or two, or in their respective team, interpersonal communications took place naturally. In a strict sense, presentation stage was not only about listening and interpreting, but also about the critical thinking process involved in a feedback loop.

#### Team-building

Team building refers to a broad range of planned activities that help groups improve the way they accomplish tasks, help members enhance their interpersonal and problem-solving skills, and increase team performance (Cummings & Worley, 2014). Belbin's (1981) categorizes team roles into nine types in the model of Nine Team Roles: Plant, Specialist, Monitor Evaluator, Implementer, Shaper, Completer Finisher, Team-worker, Coordinator, and Resource-investigator. The first three are categorized as thought-oriented team roles, concerned more with systems thinking and mental planning. The next three are action-oriented team roles, focusing more on practical actions and learning from doing. The last three are people-oriented team roles, caring more about interpersonal relationships and interactional communication. In an English learning team, students are skilled in different aspects: some are good at searching for materials; some may be adept at organizing ideas together; and others may be expert in presenting the project. Each individual, when put in the right place, contributes the most to the project.

**Table 4: Nine Roles in a Team**

Thought-oriented	Plant	Presents new ideas and approaches.
	Specialist	Provides specialized skills.
	Monitor Evaluator	Analyzes the options.
Action-oriented	Implementer	Be good at carrying out plans efficiently.
	Shaper	Challenges the team to improve.
	Completer Finisher	Encourages thorough and timely completion.
People-oriented	Team-worker	Encourages cooperation.
	Coordinator	Acts as a chairperson.
	Resource-investigator	Explores outside opportunities.

There were three action learning cycles in this semester. Students adjusted themselves to different roles in the team with different projects. When students dug out their best potential in one aspect, their learning confidence and interest increased as well. This led to a virtuous circle for their learning.

### 3.3.5 Peer & Self-Assessment—Appreciative Inquiry

Peer/self-assessment refers to reflection of themselves as learners and the language learning process. After the critical reflection of the previous action learning cycle, students reframe their learning experiences as an individual, as a team and as a learning community member. As Adamson (2011) maintains: "The assessment, particularly the self-assessment, appears to play a vital role in promoting autonomy" (p.198). During the peer and self-assessment stage, students are allowed assess the expected and unexpected learning results together, and they are offered another chance to cross-check their learning results and learning process after a learning cycle. Peer & Self-assessment is derived from "evaluation" in Work Cycle (Legenhausen, 2003). During this collective reflective thinking process, they are receptive to multiple perspectives and diverse opinions. Going through self-assessment and peer-assessment gives students authoritative positions and enable them to give credit to their own words. Thus, in an autonomous learning cycle with peer & self-assessment, students are more apt to take responsibility for their own learning and are more engaged in learning activities (Mohamadpour, 2013). Little (2004) puts learner reflection as one of his three main pedagogical principles of learner autonomy; and he considers self-assessment as one of the keys to successful language learning because it involves what he thinks as the three most important principles of "learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use" (2007, p. 23). Kohonen (2003) advocates sustainable authentic assessment as well. It can be acquired in a learning community where peer-assessment and self-assessment are integrated together. Through the reflective action learning, students awaken their potentials and reframe their learning patterns based on the past experiences of their own and the peers. By unlearning and reframing, students started a new cycle with updating knowledge of the learning process. Such reflective learning was crucial for the development of learner autonomy and life-long learning.

#### Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) Appreciative inquiry originated from Cooperrider's (1986) doctoral program of organizational behavior research. He observed that people could achieve a better performance when they were appreciated and trusted. With the support of his supervisor, Dr. Suresh Srivastava, he continued his research of this theme and finished his seminal dissertation (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Traditionally, organization development appears when there are some problems or obstacles that disturb the normal operation of an organization, which is a mending procedure; however, appreciative inquiry works from the other way—it creates the ideal state instead of mending what is broken (Rothwell, Stavros & Sullivan, 2010). AI puts emphasis on strengths-based research—to appreciate the best, to envision the desired state, to have dialogues among all related members,

and to reflect on and renew the strategy and design. AI 4D model is the most frequently used in different researches (see Figure 11).



**Figure 11:** AI 4D Cycle

The AI 4D cycle begins with the discovery phase—to discover through story-sharing and to learn from collected wisdom; then the dream phase—to dream for the ideal future and anticipate the greatest possibilities of the organization; the third phase is to design—to design their ideal organization according to their anticipation in the dream phase and to establish realizable objectives; the last one is the destiny phase—to review the whole change process and to get the related feedback. AI 4D cycle forms a culture of appreciative learning and continuous change gradually. In this paper, AI was adopted by the researcher to dig out the most potentials out of every student. The supportive and friendly learning climate in the learning cycle corresponded to AI philosophy. So, it was essential for the researcher to first introduce AI to students prior to the learning cycle, which provided a more solid foundation for students' psychological readiness to persist in the learning cycle project.

#### 4. Conclusion

If the call of the times were taken into consideration, business students are facing great challenges in integrating English learning with their professional knowledge. To keep up with the global trend and to get the most frontier professional information in their respective field, business students should make joint efforts to create their own learning communities. This paper was followed by an action research in a northeastern private language university, P.R. China that determined the usefulness of the proposed model (SPALC). Students' sense of responsibility and satisfaction were enhanced as well during the process. Team learning and dialogic communication were promoted to strengthen business students' English learning community.

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