



Empowering Authentic Learning in the University English Language Classroom: An Eco-constructivist Paradigm

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Abstract

Recently, new perspectives have been opened to deepen our general understanding of language; more specifically the English language. These new perspectives converge towards making English language learning (ELL) more self-regulated and self-directed, hence more connected to the outer world. This implies decentralizing the classroom learning environment (CLE) and activities. Decentralization implies shifting into a more learner-focused mode. With respect to the university sector, this mode can prevail if authentic learning (AL) is applied, hence if university English language learners (UELLs) establish real-life connections between what is going on inside their university English language classrooms (UELCs) and what is occurring outside them. From this angle, the present paper advocates that UELLs should not be aliens to their context. They should rather unravel it by engaging into authentic classroom learning activities (ACLAs). These activities follow an eco-constructivist paradigm, and both are meant to complement each other to draw a cogent picture about AL and the need to empower it at the university sector, in general, and with respect to ELL, in particular.

Key words: ELL, CLE, AL, UELLs, UELC(s), ACLAs.

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I. Introduction

No one can deny the fact that the twenty-first century has been characterized by many changes that have touched almost all life fields. With respect to ELL, these changes have been witnessed in relation to both educational thinking and future planning. In other words, today's researchers and educators have become more concerned than ever with the most innovative approaches that could ensure better approaches and strategies that match their students' needs in the present and future runs. Catalyzing AL has become mandatory more than ever, since it encourages learners to bring the world to their classrooms. At the university level, students become more aware of the problems their society or their world faces, so they seek an instruction that enables them to express more deeply their views how to solve these issues. Therefore, this paper appeals for more empowerment of AL for the positive implications it can proffer UELLs. It is approached through the amalgamation of both ecological and constructivist paradigms. These paradigms are shaped through the combination of both project based learning (PBL) and think pair share activities (TPSAs) as mere instances of ACLAs that can be implemented in the UELCs.

1. AL and the ecological paradigm:

UELLs cannot learn English miscellaneous skills and develop them without the presence of a space where they can communicate their thoughts and interact with their teachers and peers. Such a learning space represents a platform for language contextualization and learners' socialization. In this paper, this space is bound by two main constructs: the physical construct and the socio-emotional constructs.

1.1. The physical construct

With regard to the physical construct, it involves the physical configuration of the classroom: the way desks are arranged, walls decorated, and all that contributes to the spread of "physical security" (Stadler-Altman, 2015, p.553). Besides, the physical environment of the classroom has a powerful impact on student learning and achievement, as confirmed by Asiyai (2014). By the same token, Asiyai (2014) confirms that the physical setting per se represents a condition that has to be satisfied to obtain positive learning outcomes. On such bases, the present work stresses that the availability of an authentic physical context in the UELC can have a positive impact on the way knowledge is used and disseminated among UELLs. An authentic physical context

is by excellence a context where students actively access information resources and databases to solve complex issues instead of passively receiving courses that are delivered linearly through traditional lectures and tutorials. This point has been advocated by Herrington & Herrington (2007) who underpin that “it is not sufficient to simply provide suitable examples from real-world situations to illustrate the concept or issue being taught” (p. 70). Herrington & Herrington (2007) add that there are other crucial requirements that converge towards the promotion of an embracing physical environment and equally “a large number of resources to enable sustained examination from different perspectives” (p. 70).

The physical setting can impact education in so many ways, namely that there is relation between “the classroom and its arrangement with the conduct of lessons within that classroom” (Stadler-Altman, 2015, p. 548). Based on Steele's work (1973), Weinstein (2007) identified five basic criteria that shape the CLE at the elementary and secondary levels: security and shelter, pleasure, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, and social contact. Security and shelter suggest the notion of protection. Pleasure entails motivation. Symbolic identification involves the personality of the classroom learning setting that is shaped by both crucial characters: the teacher and the learner. Task instrumentality implies the way whereby tasks are carried out in a flexible environment that encourages their design and implementation. Regarding the social contact, it departs from the presence of action zones for teachers and learners to exchange knowledge and discuss certain issues at stake. This study approaches the same criteria but from another angle, that of the tertiary level, thence the university sector, and with respect to ELL.

1.2. The social-emotional construct

The social construct partakes in designing an authentic CLE. It invokes the notions of self and other (Poulou, 2009). According to Poulou (2009), shared communication and meaning between the teacher and the learner are crucial to maintain a rich teacher-student relationship. The importance of the social component has already been underscored by Ben Elouidhine & Ferjani (2015) who advocate that learning English is a social collaborative process between the teacher and the learner. Both are primary characters in the classroom and the learning process is advanced through their mutual understandings and undertakings. This process is upheld in *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL). The SFL notion was first coined by Halliday in the United Kingdom in the 1960's and later used as a revolutionary theory in Applied Linguistics. The SFL theory has so far been evolving, bridging between Linguistics and Sociology (O'Donnell, 2011), hence standing as two core fields that have serious impacts on the latest ELC-based studies. It has proved to be very impactful pedagogically speaking, as it presents language as a component that functions in a social context (Schleppegrell, 2013). This social use of language is recommended in this paper as it has key affordances for both teachers and students alike by enriching their social relations inside the ELC.

By affecting the learner's extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, the social construct entails a second one that is by excellence emotional. Harvey et al (2012) are convinced that learners should be endowed with emotional skills. Accordingly, these skills contribute to making UELs control their behavior and emotions in the ELC, maintain positive relationships with their teachers and peers, feel responsible for the decisions to make and take, as well solve problems and issues. Emotional skills equally involve self-awareness and self-management. According to Jones et al (2013) “social and emotional competencies like managing emotions and stress are needed more today than ever before” (p. 62). This study adds that they can shape a stress-free environment that has in turn its say in developing a positive CLE.

Positive class climate is related to improved student academic outcomes, reduction in internalizing behavior disorders, enhanced student social and emotional competence, greater engagement and motivation to learn, reduced teacher victimization, and improved attendance. (Harvey et al, 2012, p. 628)

More, Harvey et al (2012) found out that teachers and students' mutual interactions and social connections are crucial ingredients in the promotion of a social-emotional CLE which can enhance social and emotional learning.

II. AL and the constructivist paradigm:

AL is an instructional approach that exposes learners, in general, and UELs, in particular, to real-world problems and allows them to talk about these problems, find out about their causes, and endeavor to come out with possible solutions that can be doable in the corresponding contexts (Har, 2005). As such, AL breaks the rules of traditional learning in which these learners are just seen as mere recipients of information and information per se are grasped only through repetition and memorization. AL spoils too the traditional image of learners who sit in their classrooms and follow instructions that are mostly dictated by the curriculum.

2.1. AL and the cognitive constructivist paradigm:

AL allows UELs to construct and their knowledge via self-discovery and exploration. They no longer accept to be cocooned in their ELCs. They want to think outside of themselves and go beyond the inner shell. Therefore, AL can be deemed constructivist real-life learning. It is highly

recommended as the best way of learning for students. It is solidly grounded by the theories of learning and cognition, in a batch of theories so called the constructivist learning, which refers to the theory of cognitive development by Jean Piaget (1986-1980), discovery learning by Jerome Seymour Bruner (1915-), and constructivist learning by Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934). (Har, 2005, p. 1)

The cognitive constructivist theory in education suggests that learners can construct their knowledge and meaning from their own experiences. This implies that students as UELs shift to a more active role; in other words, from receivers to transmitters of information. Besides, “learners will be constantly trying to derive their own personal mental model of the real world from their perceptions of that world” (Bada & Olusegun, 2015, p. 66). Applied to the CLE, the constructivist approach pushes students to use real-world problem-solving tools to bridge between the previously-acquired knowledge and the newly-one (Oliver, 2000). Standing for a new learning style that encourages students to develop very useful products to be shared with their real world, AL is considered a key for learning as a self-regulatory process and knowing as occurring through the constructions of new reality-based models (Fosnot, 2013). Therefore, AL can be deemed a cognitive constructivist real-life learning.

2.2. ALL and the social constructivist paradigm:

The social constructivist paradigm was developed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). It defends the idea that learning is contingent upon social interaction. Therefore, knowledge is constructed through collaborative undertakings and sharings. In this respect, Vygotsky underpins the importance of affording a social context for learning (Hausfather, 1996). Three core themes characterize Vygotsky’s approach. The first theme emphasizes that the way the mind changes can be a drive towards understanding it. According to the second theme, social activity can shape mental functions. As far as the third theme is concerned, it rests on the tenet that tools and signs intervene in the higher mental functioning of the brain (Hausfather, 1996). Accordingly, cognitive changes cannot be fulfilled if the social environment is overlooked. In other words, learning is closely tied to the social context where it occurs, and both are advanced through the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

To Vygotsky, the inculcation of culture into the classroom is imperative. This inculcation can be manifested through social patterns of behavior that are inherent through the generations (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). More, introducing cultural tools like rhymes and stories can play a crucial role in promoting both thinking and learning. In this digital era, cultural tools have become easily widespread through social media and the boom of digital technology. Vygotsky finds in language the most useful cultural tool that can be used to enhance learners’ cognitive skills (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). Listening and talking are the main ingredients to promote thinking and understanding. For sure, language is the best drive towards meaning creation. It is a tool of social engagement which is at the core of social constructivism.

III. The ACLAs that Go on Par with the eco-constructivist paradigm to AL:

The amalgamation of both ecological and constructivist paradigms provide AL with a new update that is by excellence eco-constructivist. Connecting UELs to real-world issues can be successful through the improvement of not only ELL approaches but also ACLAs. The main point is not only to keep students motivated to learn English, but equally to make them better equipped with skills that can help them later deal, pragmatically, with the real issues that they may face. PBL and TPSAs can be a relevant catalyst in this regard.

3.1. PBL:

PBL was first pioneered by the philosopher John Dewey (1959) who “argues that students will develop personal investment in the material if they engage in real, meaningful tasks and problems that emulate what experts do in real-world situations” (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Applied to UELL, PBL can foster not only English skills but equally cognitive, emotional, and social skills. This has already been defended by Castañeda (2014) who finds in the implementation of PBL in ELC an efficient teaching and learning strategy at the cognitive, emotional, and social scales. Cognitively speaking, PBL can help students memorize the English vocabulary they learn by relating it to the pedagogical activities they actively take part in. Emotionally speaking, Castañeda (2014) underpins that PBL can increase their motivation for learning English when addressing problems that are directly related to their context. Socially speaking, Castañeda (2014) argues that engaging students in mini-projects has proved to be successful in improving their relationships with their teachers, even in developing their human values. Thus, one can safely draw the conclusion that PBL is a

cognitive, emotional, and social asset for teaching and learning English, hence its application can nurture further the eco-constructivist paradigm to AL.

This study adds that conducting interactive conversational undertakings (ICUs) as instances of mini-projects can be an instance to apply PBL in ELC. Indeed, when UELs decide their own topics, they can determine the sub-activities that help them construct ecologically their knowledge together about the topics that they have already chosen. Ben Elouidhine (2022) emphasizes the contribution of ICUs in promoting student empowerment. The latter is fulfilled through the merge of both voice and choice: when given the freedom to choose the real-world problem they want to tackle, UELs will freely express their voice by exchanging their views about the targeted issues with both their teachers and their classmates. Thus, they can take part in the decision-making process and connect to the world outside their ELCs. In this framework, Hellermann & Vergun (2007) advocate that involving UELs in PBL would help them “engage in ‘conversational’ talk as an outgrowth of their participation in the task” (p. 173). Consequently, UELs can develop their social skills in addition to their higher order thinking skills through their involvement in team work and deeper knowledge; that is, through their exposure to a humanizing process of ELL. On the same wavelength, Ben Elouidhine (2022) found out that introducing PBL is an urgent requirement.

It pushes teachers to innovate their methodologies and apply cutting-edge pedagogies that meet their students’ present and prospective requirements. Accordingly, teachers can encourage their students to unearth real-world issues and work in collaborative groups to think about solutions whereby to remedy the posed problems. As such, they can cover miscellaneous problem solving, hence authentic activities through which they can develop a variety of cross-curriculum skills. (Ben Elouidhine, 2022, pp. 194-195)

3.2. TPSAs:

The TPSAs represent another illustration of ACLAs that help promote AL. Indeed, such activities are based on the collaborative learning strategy which incites students to work together to solve a given problem or answer a particular question regarding a specific reading. By applying it to UELs, TPSAs can give the learner the opportunity to *think* individually, so more creatively and critically, then after being *paired* with another student, s/he can *share* his/her thinking with the partner. As a result, they can work collaboratively on the issue at stake. By doing so, UELs can build their oral communication skills. This has already been found out by Usman (2015) who emphasized that the use of the TPSAs is effective and productive in promoting learners’ speaking skills. The same result has been declared by Raba (2017) who urged curriculum designers to increase TPSAs in the English textbooks and teachers to use them more in their speaking classes as such activities represent an efficient strategy to develop students’ speaking and oral communication skills, besides their critical thinking skills: a finding already obtained by Kaddoura (2013). In a nutshell, the use of TPSAs can allow UELs to go authentic inside their ELCs.

Going authentic in ELC is possible through UELs’ endowment not only with oral and cognitive skills but also with social skills. The latter are acquired through students’ engagements in ICUs which are enhanced through the TPSAs. Such undertakings represent active learning strategies that are meant to involve both teachers and learners in “social encounters” (Ducharme & Bernard, 2001, p. 826). Such encounters are enriched through both teachers and students’ interactions. Through these interactions, both teachers and their students form a social group, even a social community; consequently, embrace ZPD. UELs can thus socialize into the classroom culture. Via their ICUs with their teachers, they can “discuss issues, solve problems, participate in simulations, conduct research, think critically, work cooperatively and make decisions” (Sharma & Saarsar, 2018, p. 91). As defended by Sharma & Saarsar (2018), TPSAs stand for “an effective cooperative learning strategy for unleashing discussion in classroom interaction” (p. 91). The discussion process enriched through UELs’ ICUs which are at the heart of TPSAs enables these learners to connect what they learn to real-life situations, so apply AL. Concisely, TPSAs represent such cooperative, active, and experiential learning strategies “which encourage students to play a proactive role by participating in classroom interaction and at the same time help them in creating a lively environment by meaningful discussions” (Sharma & Saarsar, 2018, p. 92).

IV. Conclusion

Empowering AL in the ELC is possible through the eco-constructivist paradigm. The latter is shaped through the blending of both PBL and TPSAs. Both ACLAs align with this paradigm to present AL as a humanized approach to learning, in general, and ELL, in particular. These activities could proffer UELs with the opportunity to contextualize their ELL and conceptualize the relations that real-world issues can arise. They can be enhanced through ICUs which can help UELs to establish an overpass between the learner and the English language as well as between the learner and the outer world. The result is a connection between the language per se and the outer world, as language can never be dissociated from the context in which it is learnt, hence from reality. In fact, ELL should always mirror the real-life complexities and issues. By the same token,

UELLs should be made more aware of the importance of being endowed with a myriad of skills that are actually needed in their academic and professional life. All this places AL at the core of interdisciplinarity that joins learning a language to studying other subjects in order to help students grow into problem solvers and decision makers, shoving them to confer a valuable contribution to their society.

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