

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia Anglica I (2011)

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REVISITING THE STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH CLASS: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE STRUCTURE PROMOTE NEW MOTIVATIONAL PATTERNS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS?

Introduction

Learning English has undergone frequent and multiple metamorphoses during the last twenty years in post-communist Romania. Both globalisation and local economical and social context have made English learning a necessity from an early age. However, experience and current evaluations have showed that young learners encounter several difficulties in adapting their knowledge (resulted mainly from the subjects they learn at school) to the linguistic skills they acquire in English.

The aim of this paper is to revisit some concepts related to English language teaching from a more complex perspective. Up to the present, the tendency has been to teach grammar, vocabulary or conversational structures separately, expecting the learner to reproduce them as correctly as possible in certain situations (at school or in real life). Social theories (Dewey 1916, 1933, 1938; Freire 1972, 1995; Illich 1973, 1975), the ecological approach (van Lier 2004) and the communities of practice theories (Lave 1991, Wenger 2005, Rogoff 2006) emphasize the importance of situated learning and intentional participation in generating meaning.

The research described in this paper represents the initial stages of a project that is investigating different patterns of learning emergences that may occur within a language class, organized as a community of practice, in a non-formal environment. What is the impact of pedagogy based on community of practice? Could this new perspective be proposed as more efficient and motivating approach to learning foreign languages and cultures?

Theoretical insights

The ecological approach and language learning

Language learning in classrooms is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon. Acknowledging the notions of chaos and complexity regarding language learning (Larsen-Freeman 1997) and considerations of the class as a social ecosystem, the ecological approach focuses on the elements of the environment that make things happen the way they do. Ecology is also about the study of the dynamic, non-static dimension of learning. This combination between predictable and unpredictable influences and situations taking place in the language class provides “affordances

for active participants in the setting, and learning emerges as a part of affordances being picked up and exploited for further action" (van Lier 2004: 8). My project is based on the analysis of the type of emergences appearing within the language class and on their consequences on learners' motivation to learn English.

The concepts of *emergence* and *affordance* are particularly relevant to my research as they reflect the results of the dynamic dimension of formal-informal learning strategies in a non-formal environment. According to van Lier and in terms of learning, *affordance* indicates a relationship between a learner and the environment, "that signals an opportunity for or inhibition of action" while *emergence* happens "when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher-order system" (van Lier 2004: 4–5). Language learners develop various patterns, both of action and knowledge-in-action through their interactions with others and with their environment. The ecological approach favours the interconnections, centre-multiplicity and the space within knowledge and learning centres.

Environment in language learning represents a key factor as it is defined in strict relation to contexts in which learners acquire the language outside the school (family, street, etc.). Thus, the school environment proves to be an excellent territory for uncontrolled language learning dynamics: the language input the pupils provide to the class language patterns is constantly reshaped by their experiences outside the school.

Environment learning analysis cannot be imagined without considering the concepts of *formal*, *informal* and *non-formal* learning. I will use for this research the definitions given by the European Commission: formal learning is typically provided by education or training institutions, with structured learning objectives, learning time and learning support. It is intentional on the part of the learner and leads to certification. Informal learning, however, results from daily activities related to work, family life or leisure. It is not structured and usually does not lead to certification, and in most cases, it is unintentional on the part of the learner.

For this project, the formal environment represented by English taught and learned in school and the informal environment referring to other means of learning the language, exterior to the institutional ones, are interconnected within a non-formal environment, a language class organized in a community of practice. Non-formal learning is not provided by education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional on the part of the learner and has structured objectives, time and support. The non-formal dimension of this community work is conferred by intentionality on the part of both teacher and learner (it was his/her choice to participate in this project and the sessions are not included in the curriculum), time planning and presence of main objectives.

Language learning and community of practice

Lave and Wenger first introduced the concept of Community of Practice (CoP) in 1991. Central to their notion of CoP as a means of acquiring knowledge is the process by which newcomers move from peripheral to full participation in the community as they learn from others. They named this process Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP).

As language learning is translated in terms of environment interactions and consequent emergences, the communities of practice theory represent an important

landmark of my research as young learners (consciously or not) are members of different communities, both at school (class community, friends' community, etc.) and outside it (family community, playmates groups, sports community, etc.). As Etienne Wenger (2007) defines them, "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Applying this definition to the analysed group it has to be emphasized that its activity is represented by the learn-do-play triangle, as it is representative for the learners' age.

The class chosen for this project has been organised in a community following these main criteria: characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger 2005), member status (every community has core members and others placed at the margins depending on the dimension of their engagement in task solving), shared interests and repertoire. Members share a set of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98), and the fact that they are organized around a particular theme and activity confers on them a sense of identity. Commonly, the Romanian language teaching system highly prioritises individual work, while often disregarding learning in a community or by peer influence and help. The main hypothesis is that the activities of such community designed in a non-formal environment enable the emergence of language strategies which prove to be more efficient than those set by teaching system centred on the fact that learners are constraint to acquire discursive strategies.

Language learning motivation

Modern research in the field of motivation theories reveals two series of theoretical paradigms: general theories (which present motivation as a feature of people's personality subjected or not to variation) and situated theories (Dörnyei 2003). First of all, the latter highlights equally important roles of three elements, namely motivational factors, learner's exterior context and learner's specific features. What I consider edifying for this research is the analysis of the language learning complexity in a community of practice as a result of the intersection between situated learning in a specific context and situated motivation theories.

Profoundly influenced by the psycho-social approach, Robert Gardner's theory of motivation (1985) identifies motivational intensity (effort), the desire to learn the language (the need), attitudes regarding language learning (cognition) and the pleasure of learning (emotion). From an ecological perspective, these elements must be connected to the specificity of the environment, a combination of formal, non-formal, and informal elements in our case.

In self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) intrinsic motivation refers to behaviour which gives pleasure and satisfaction to the learner, "the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequences" (Deci and Ryan 2000: 56) while extrinsic motivation corresponds to the desire of doing an action as a means of obtaining something else such as a higher mark, a better position or a certain reward.

"Interest in the motivational basis of language learning tasks can be seen as the culmination of the situated approach in L2 motivation research" (Dörnyei 2003: 14). Firstly, the task is the most important condition of the environment, in the community's activity in our case and, secondly, the task and the way the learner

refers to it are strongly related to the learning-teaching process. A non-formal context of learning, deprived of task or assessment constraints, benefits more from the learners' knowledge, skills and behaviour, as the personal expression is higher than in a formal context.

Research methodology

Project planning

The overall research designed for the project consists of several elements: an analysis of all the phases of the project, pupil questionnaires and pupil interviews. The project is designed for a period of 9 months and it has five stages: a preparatory stage, a second stage (a 7-week period with specific activities grouped around cultural icons related to Italy and England), a third stage (an 8-week period with similar activities on France and Germany), an assessment stage and a follow-up stage.

Name and number of stage	Stage description
1. Preparatory stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – students' level of English is tested (reading, listening, speaking and writing skills, and also cultural knowledge about the British and European culture); – pair work and individual activities;
2. Main stage A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – specific activities in order to practice all communicative skills with particular focus on cultural elements from Italy and England; – pair work and group work; – activities designed to encourage teamwork and the development of a community of practice;
3. Main stage B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – same set of activities oriented to the French and German cultural environment;
4. Assessment stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – group and class assessment of final products: advertising posters, tourist leaflets, registered role plays and project diary accordingly to pre-established criteria: linguistic, cultural and originality and creativity parameters;
5. Follow-up stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – discussions around topics which have not been treated during the project or others which emerged as a consequence of the linguistic, cultural and collaborative work undergone by the members of the class-community.

Participants

The present project has been developed due to the contribution of ALDIDAC (Approche Linguistique et Didactique de la Différence Culturelle), a research group within IMAGER (Institut des Mondes Anglophone, Germanique et Roman) at Paris East University (France) and the Primary and Secondary School n° 19 from Timișoara (Romania). The pupils are in their last year of primary school and their second year of learning English as a compulsory subject in a formal context. Learners are 10 years old and they participate in this project one and a half hour each week. The language class (13 students) is conceived as a community that shares certain features (age, knowledge level, learning skills and English level) and whose members are involved in a series of activities imagined around the theme "Intercultural voyage."

The learners work in two groups, the criterion of choice being their personal preferences of accession to a specific group. Accompanied by an imaginary friend, they undertake a voyage to several countries, experiencing real life situations

(checking-in at the airport, interacting with the flight attendants during the flight, ordering food in a restaurant, asking for information, checking-in at the hotel, etc.), learning about the culture of the countries, and producing various materials (e.g. a newspaper article, letters, advertising posters, their own materials for the activities). Meanwhile the participants both practice and develop communication skills in English. The formal dimension of this community is given by the involvement of the participants' primary school teacher and the coordinator of the project, who is both an English teacher and a researcher.

Research tools

The data presented in this chapter was obtained during the second phase of the project and are the results of crossed analysis of the following: a collective initial assessment, an observatory protocol, informal interviews with the pupils after each session, constant feedback from the participants, the text of an article for the school magazine, and pupil questionnaires.

The coordinator of the project was responsible for the observatory scheme which consisted of the following categories: the number of participants, time distribution for each task (imposed by the teacher, accepted or negotiated, proposed by the pupils), attitudes towards task-solving (positive or negative attitudes; acceptance vs. refusal), task-solving strategies (strategies within the group and the community, strategies specific to formal or informal learning, emergence of new strategies), autonomy parameters (how the pupils solved the tasks: alone, in pairs, in group), motivation patterns (expressed vs. non-expressed motivation, implicit vs. explicit desire to learn more, verbalisation of their desires or obstacles while solving the tasks, the acknowledgement of certain elements which the pupils have found particularly motivating, and pupil-teacher relationship.

Observatory scheme

Stages	Preparatory	Main stage A	Main stage B	Assessment stage	Follow-up stage
Variables					
Number of participants					
Time distribution/task					
Type of attitudes					
Autonomy parameters					
Motivation patterns					

At the end of each weekly session, the groups gathered and each of their members had to give an overall opinion about their learning experiences. The goal of these activities was to encourage pupils to freely express their opinions regarding their own learning and to raise their awareness of their responsibility as full participants in the English learning process. During the entire project, pupils were asked to complete three charts pinned on the board called: "things I've liked today," "things I haven't liked today," "things I wish we did." Another data item that I consider particularly interesting is the writing of an article for the school magazine, the text of which reflected their feelings and opinions on the project.

All the participants completed the final questionnaire consisting of sections covering the following areas: autobiographical details, general impressions on the activities, degrees of participation in the English classes (regular class and project class), use of knowledge (learned in or out of school, from several school subjects), activities within the group (frequency, variety, participation), describing learning strategies and autonomy, commenting on community cohesion, and comparison of their language and motivation levels.

Research findings and further discussions

The observatory scheme has been a useful tool in collecting data about learners' approach to the task. For example, on some occasions, the learners easily accepted and solved the task, but at other times, the task had to be negotiated. There was also a constant tension as far as the language used was concerned (the mother tongue or English). In addition, the activities' dynamic and cooperative dimension has attracted learners' attention and raised their motivation.

Weekly discussion sessions represented a complementary and evaluative data collection tool as their role was to confirm or infirm the information obtained from the observatory scheme. It is important to highlight the fact that this type of group sharing (the teacher being also a member) has showed that learners are more aware of their linguistic and learning potential if they are asked to talk about it and if they listen to their peers' experiences. Moreover, the results given by the assessment questionnaires have confirmed the previous data: diversified activities without a specific linguistic purpose led to a higher participation and involvement in task solving; moving, dynamic and restructuring real life situations have a positive impact on their intrinsic motivation and on the development of new adapted learning strategies.

Task motivation and co-participatory patterns

As the data provided by this research tool revealed, the number of participants during the project remained unchanged although the measure in which they attended the activities and were involved in task solving has been fluctuating. This remark is justified and confirmed by the pupils' answers to their weekly discussion sessions. Among the recurrent elements were: the pleasure of doing an activity without evaluation pressure and a wide flexibility in choosing future topics and the playful aspect of such activities. As one of the participants mentioned: "we don't have tests, we can learn English and play at the same time." From this observation it was possible to discern several issues. There is clearly an affective attachment to the whole set of activities due to this playing-learning dimension. Even more, pupil behaviour reflects the pleasure of solving tasks and participating in activities for their "inherent satisfactions" (Deci and Ryan 2000).

Applying the member status analysis used by Wenger (2007) to the results of the observations, the creation of a group of core members has been signalled in each in contrast to members who manifested adhesion to neither tasks nor activities. The analysis of the crossing between data offered by pupils grades' records, the charts in which they have written their responsibilities during the project and the questions regarding their English level underlines the fact, that core members are pupils who

have a good level of English, presenting a higher level of confidence as far as their language skills are concerned. However, only 4 out of 13 pupils may be considered core members and the observations reveal their profile which is characterized by initiative in approaching the task and a tendency to solve it individually. It must be pointed out that the questions to the informal interviews indicated a certain change between collaborative models during the first 3 sessions and the next ones. The responses to the final questionnaire indicated that 9 out of 13 participants *often* or *sometimes* asked for their peers' help during the activities (compared to 5 out of 13).

The peripheral-marginal pair is closely related to the attitudes of participation or non-participation in the project. Involvement or refusals to complete the task are both parts of the participant's identity, impacting also the collective identity. Wenger (2005: 187) suggests that marginal and peripheral positions possess a combination of participation and non-participation. In addition, it appears to be extremely difficult to distinguish between them as they entail the development of strong identities. It may be argued that the non-participatory reactions noticed in the early sessions represented the manner in which some learners chose to approach the activity and how they related to the task imposed by the teacher. The observations have confirmed that in each working group at least 2 or 3 pupils did not approach the task, this aspect being mentioned in their feedback reports at the end of the session. A participant wrote down on her sheet: "I stay and I looked at the others... I don't know those words in English." In this example, the linguistic variable proves to be one of the factors that stimulated non-participation.

Projecting the interpretations of *non-participation* given by Wenger (2005: 191) onto this project, the data analysis has identified two types of non-participation which applied to our community: non-participation as a strategy (some pupils have mainly observed the activities before their involvement) and non-participation as a protection device. Faced with difficult learning and/or communicative moments, the pupils with a poor level in English refused to collaborate with their peers. The latter situation has been confirmed by the analysis of those pupils' responses to the questions regarding the frequency of speaking or writing actions.

On the other hand, one cannot disregard involvement in the task and motivational factors when discussing participation. As the CoP theory defines involvement in terms of negotiation of meaning, trajectory design and the evolution of learning experiences, the data from the observatory protocol and from the informal sessions underlined gradual involvement in the activities according to the following aspects: quality of task comprehension ("I haven't understood everything [...] that's why I have mistakes"), the system of skills of each group (what has each member known and how his/her knowledge helped the group) and group cohesion (a pupil justified: "we didn't finish because only four of us really worked...").

Activation of cognitive and emotional strengths was made possible by the participants' attachment to the task. Intrinsic motivation is undoubtedly connected to the specificity of the task in a certain context. The activities have been designed to involve all community members regardless of their English level. The main criteria for choosing these activities and appropriate tasks were related to other knowledge fields and/or school subjects (History, Geography, Sciences, etc.), similarity to real life situations and the presence of the fun element. As the pupils have answered in

the questionnaires (10 out of 13), the activities were evaluated as “easy,” “useful” and “interesting,” with students also adding “amusing” and/or “funny.” Moreover, compared to the regular English class (in which only 3 out of 13 students said they participated a lot in all of the activities) this activity was rated with full participation by 8 out of 13 students.

By comparison to the traditional language class, the students were highly motivated by the task flexibility and task repartition that limited the communicative constraints. For instance, designing a newspaper article demanded various skills and actions besides the linguistic element. A pupil’s remark “I’m happy I could draw and I didn’t always have to talk or write in English. I’m not very good in English” suggests the task characteristics were not restricted to learning the language as it usually happens in the formal environment. Another aspect that appealed to the participants was the freedom they had in bringing their own material to class, acknowledging also their contribution to the result of the community. Both the data offered by the observatory protocol and the article written by the pupils confirmed their positive feeling towards this liberty of choice: “I could bring my stickers and pictures with my favourite football team;” “We were allowed to bring and use materials from Geography and History too.”

As their tasks required both language and cognitive skills, the pupils were also determined to develop the management of the learning community. From my observations, it was obvious that, if at the very beginning they asked for teacher’s help to explain them “how to do” and to appoint “who to do what,” gradually group leaders emerged organising each stage of the activity. Several task-solving patterns have gradually evolved, from a reduced participation of members to a larger one; in other words, the community’s core members developed integrative skills and assimilated the other members too.

Raising competence awareness and developing adaptive skills

Community work has influenced the way the pupils perceived their results, the process being less stressful; to a certain extent, the image of the community shadowed individual performances. The immediate effect was that the pupils with a lower level of English became more motivated, more confident in their ability to do something in the foreign language. Furthermore, class cohesion has improved (10 pupils out of 13 declared they find group work very useful while 10 out of 13 reported that they collaborate better with their classmates than they did previously).

The idea of using communicative skills in English in order to structure and assess activities based on knowledge originating from other environments (outside the language class) is strongly connected to integrative and social purposes. This project was conceived within the framework of interrelatedness, a concept defined as a sensible and dynamic phenomenon between various school subjects (a high percentage of learners – 11 out of 13 – declared they used knowledge previously learnt in Geography, History, Romanian or Sciences), and between knowledge received at school and outside school (8 out of 13 pupils responded in the questionnaire that they used both school knowledge and information learnt outside school to solve the tasks).

I would also like to put forward the value conferred to the formal-informal complementarity emphasized by the intermediary and by the repertoire of this

community of practice. As a consequence of the teacher's low degree of involvement in task solving or explanation (especially towards the end of this phase); the products of the community have been influenced in their creation by the informal elements brought by the pupils.

Filling an assessment chart with their responsibilities during the activities offered a clear image of each member's degree of participation both to his/her group and to the class community. After experiencing a three-hour period of time working and learning in their own group, some pupils commented on their feelings, saying that they liked it because they were encouraged and helped to say and write things in English. In terms of *emergences*, learners' initiative in specific and spontaneous situations, of reassessing their reactions and responding appropriately in the given context must be pointed out. For example, for a role-play activity at the airport, the pupils had to create passports and one of them forgot it, thus he "came" to the "check-in desk" with his imaginary character's passport and took on a new role.

Preliminary conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that designing language activities in a class structured as a community of practice reinforces both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Moreover, crossing interrelated skills and learning strategies within situations close to real life experiences encourages learners to reassess their communication skills and adapt themselves better to various contexts. Learners have expressed a positive attitude for this modality of learning as their answers to the questionnaires show: 8 out of 13 pupils appreciated their English level better than before this weekly activity while 9 out of 13 pupils said they want to learn English more than they wanted before. Furthermore, developing adaptation as a competence represents a frequent learning strategy as the learners manage to process information coming from various environments in solving their tasks (Coroamă 2010: 327).

However, there are some limits. First of all, the temporal dimension is essential. Thus, a thorough analysis of this community project will be presented at the end of the research. It could consequently lead to further recommendations on language teaching and learning in non-formal communities of practice. Secondly, constant evaluations need to be done and observatory schemes have to be reinforced at the end of each stage in order to trace, register and categorize motivational and adaptive emergences.

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Ocena struktury klasy uczącej się angielskiego: do jakiego stopnia środowisko nauczania wpływa na motywację do nauki w klasie językowej?

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł oparty jest na badaniach nad uczniami szkół podstawowych w wielokulturowym i wielojęzycznym regionie Rumunii. Grupa docelowa składa się uczniów w czwartym roku nauki języka angielskiego, którzy w swoim otoczeniu mają kontakt z innymi językami. Badania odnoszą się do nacisku na kształcenie sprawności językowych, który jest obecny w podejściu komunikacyjnym do nauczania języków obcych, podczas gdy relacje ucznia z otoczeniem są pomijane. Projekt ten ma pomóc w analizie, do jakiego stopnia współpraca w wielojęzycznym otoczeniu ucznia wpływa na rozwój strategii językowych bardziej wydajnych niż rozwijane w systemie nauczania nastawionym na rozwój strategii dyskursywnych. Nauczyciel języka i wychowawca stworzą środowisko ćwiczeniowe za pomocą zadań wymagających wiedzy multidyscyplinarnej, aktywacji sprawności językowych i zaangażowania ucznia. Będziemy obserwować, jak uczniowie dostosowują swoje strategie w zależności od wymagań zadania, roli sprawności językowych i systemu motywacyjnego, który pojawi się w takiej strukturze zajęć.