

Integrating the Social Context and Learning Ecologies of Digital Natives in EFL Teaching Approaches

Elena MEȘTEREAGĂ *

Abstract: Teachers aiming to develop approaches to learning that facilitate an harmonious and spontaneous relationship with EFL learning for twenty-first century digital natives must ensure that the learning process explores contexts pertinent to the learner. The pedagogical reality is determined by context-specific features on which are grounded methodological choices: the participants' expectations and assumptions, and the teaching and learning features. Within a context of unprecedented exposure and occasions to use English in daily life, the present paper aims to provide pedagogical proposals which integrate learners' experiences and their learning ecologies with approaches to EFL teaching.

Keywords: EFL/L2 learning, EFL teaching, social context, learning ecologies.

1. Introduction

Several studies assume that many of the choices EFL teachers make during their classes are influenced not only by historical and affective factors, comprising approaches for instruction and attitudes towards English, but also by social factors. Concerned with the training and practices of teachers in Romania, Ene and Mitrea examine the complexity of “a highly adaptable EFL context in which teachers customize eclectic theories from multiple sources – academic, cultural and personal – in order to be able to successfully navigate the reality of their challenging context” (2013: 128). Although the EFL teaching-learning experience is significantly influenced by the significant role played by teachers, understanding the complex processes of learning requires that detailed attention must also be given to EFL learners and their particular social context.

* Ph.D. candidate in Philology, West University of Timișoara, Romania. E-mail: Elena.Mestereaga.nicuelena@hotmail.com

Current pedagogy within EFL teaching-learning holds that there is not a universally correct way that can be considered optimal for every learner to achieve the best results, consequently, teachers must understand the general characteristics of their learners and identify instructional tools that best fit young learners of English. The theoretical knowledge held by teachers of English needs to be coupled with a practical approach adapted to the particular group of EFL learners if teachers are to obtain the best results from their teaching. Maximal results are also determined by the part played by learners and through their active participation in the process of learning English. To understand the relationship between the digital world occupied by twenty-first century learners and their EFL learning, the challenge is to expand EFL/L2 learning outside of the classroom. Bentley (1998: 7) has stated that at the heart of the argument is the recognition of the fact that EFL learning can occur in varied situations, at varied times, not only during English classes.

It is recognised that the social context of the learner influences motivation and attitude and also provides opportunities which may, and should be used to the benefit of language learner. This paper discusses the socially-oriented features of digital natives as an essential and complementary condition of EFL learning and acquisition. Because the social interaction of teacher-learner and learner-learner in English is often limited to class interaction, solutions need to be found which capitalise on the learners' contexts and which provide the best opportunities for English communication. EFL/L2 acquisition is more than a linguistic learning system, it also represents a social practice where the learner negotiates identities in a variety of contexts, and where the main concern becomes understanding the social conditions that promote learning and the use of English.

Spolsky presented two essential ways in which EFL/L2 learning is influenced by the social context. Firstly, social context influences the language learner's attitudes towards the target language (TL), the learning situation, and its speakers. Secondly, it provides the social condition for the opportunities and situations generating TL learning (1989: 131). This view sets out the complex set of factors encountered under the umbrella of the social aspect of EFL learners and convinces us that its elements are in the area of interest for the EFL teacher and researcher. As the main goal of EFL teaching is to generate proficient users of English, anything that can contribute to the process of successful learning becomes implicitly important.

2. EFL Learners' Social Context

The role of social context is indirectly implied in establishing certain conditions for EFL/L2 learning. "Its effect rather is indirect, and its conditions are conditions on the development of attitudes to learning and learning opportunities" (Spolsky 1989: 131). In order to understand these effects, the first task is to analyse the significant features of the social contexts in which English is learned. One way of doing this is to describe the general sociolinguistic situation of the learner in terms of where the learning takes place.

The range of possible avenues for language learning in a society or in a group is limited by the language situation, and choices are affected in turn by a number of sociolinguistic features. An overview of the learners' situation is provided by setting out the place that EFL occupies in the learner's life as well as in the current society, by the learners' social context, and by any other factors that may influence linguistic improvement. Such a task is far from simple as it requires deciding what constitutes important or relevant features from a learner's background and from their social life, topics which are exhaustive. According to Vygotskyan's (1978) sociocultural theory, the socially-oriented conditions are represented by the social practices of L2 learners in those contexts where learning takes place and by the social interaction with more competent speakers (Norton & Toohey 2001: 318). Concerned with English language teaching, Oxford (2001: 359) and Harmer (2007: 396) identified the social dimension as one of the six categories (cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social) within English learning strategies.

Given that EFL learning and use is by no means limited to the classroom, it is necessary to consider the environment outside the classroom and analyse where and how English is used. Bentley (1998) noted that EFL learners and their activities for learning are not constrained by the classroom setting and "because effective learning can take place in many and varied contexts, it is possible for them to engage in positive learning activities and relationships almost wherever they are" (83). If this possibility exists, we are compelled to take such contextual factors into account in order to fathom their role in EFL/L2 learning and use. In Romania, English language use and learning begins in the educational institution, the first setting in which learners express their first words, phrases and ideas in English, but the complete picture of language use cannot be limited to this space. As Miller (2004) puts it, this first step brings a valuable contribution to the progress of learning because it forms the springboard for English use in daily life. Being audible to others, and being heard and acknowledged as a speaker of English is a determining factor for participation in social interactions, negotiation, and practices within the educational institution and in the wider society (Miller in Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004:294). So, leaving the school environment where EFL learners receive specialized instruction for English learning but where they have limited opportunities to express newly encountered language, learners also participate in social activities and practices in the wider society. Expanding the image of English language use and learning to include the social context of learners where communication takes place in meaningful ways, situates us on the ground of valuing those social interactions in the TL which promote the progress in English learning and acquisition.

3. Personal English Learning Ecology

As presented by Barron (2006: 195), the concept of learning ecologies comprises the set of contexts encountered either in the physical or virtual space that provide opportunities for learning. Similarly, Martindale & Dowdy (2010) and Dabbagh &

Kitsantas (2011) use the notion of personal learning networks, referring to informal learning networks and other activities that support learning, and also known as personal learning environments. With reference to the life of the EFL learner, Cabot uses the concept of the personal English learning ecology (PELE) to designate the reality created by a learner of English when he learns the language and certain ecological transitions take place (2016: 167). Learning ecologies (Barron, 2006; Cabot, 2016; Van Lier, 2004, 2010) or learning lives (Erstad 2013) represent the entire set of contexts that can be encountered in the EFL learner's environment which provide the learner with opportunities to learn English. The learning life concept proposed by Erstad points out the need to draw on developments from various fields of research in order to understand the complex issues related to the way children or young learners experience learning through participation in everyday practices across temporal and spatial delimitations (2013: 14). In an EFL learner's life, English is part of a personal ecology, in which, through daily learning experiences, the learner develops a linguistic ability facilitated to a great extent by the digital context.

An "ecological transition" takes place whenever the position of an individual in his ecological environment is transformed as a result of changes in the setting, in the role of that person, or both (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 26). This term designates the crucial moments in a learner's trajectory and Erstad (2014: 9) describes this phenomenon using the concept of "learner in motion". An EFL learner is in continual motion through ceaseless ecological transitions, from the English beginner during primary school, to an intermediate level by secondary school, later becoming an advanced English user. The problem is that not all EFL learners, even within the same class, are able to follow this progressive line in English learning. As long as instruction received within an English class is the same for all learners in that group, and time spent at school is again the same for EFL learners from the same class, then, apart from personal abilities, such PELEs are the variable from learners' lives that can hinder some ecological transitions thus generating different levels in English acquisition.

Accordingly, everyday practices within the EFL learners' environment deserve consideration, as these are the conditions that vary from one learner to another. Through an understanding of these everyday practices, teachers can help their learners to identify, mine and benefit from effective and sustainable PELEs to enrich the EFL learning experience and to achieve the best learning outcomes.

4. Integrative EFL Teaching Approach

An ecological education (Tudor, 2001; 2003), or local meaningfulness (Mihai, 2003; Troudi, 2005; Taylor, 2009) combines context and ethnography with the dynamics of teaching and learning situations. This is translated into practice by adaptation to local perceptions and values, to learners' attitudes, beliefs and to their goals (Taylor 2009: 422-423). In the Romanian context EFL teachers can bring massive improvement to their classrooms, in spite of the EFL pre-established syllabi. Their task is to adapt the

nationally imposed syllabi to the existing schemata of EFL learners (Clarke 1991) and using activities appropriate to the current context of the digital natives they are teaching. It requires not only acknowledging EFL learners' expectations and attitudes, but also taking into consideration their learning styles, their concerns and their previous knowledge. An EFL teacher who fails to do this, risks triggering an antagonism to activities that ignore learners' particularities and which are not adapted to the number and particularities of students in a class (Ellis 1996). Taylor asserts that involving "students' cognitive and affective sides in the development of their own language learning" is logical and vitally important (2009: 424). The evolution towards communicative approaches and learner-centeredness as a result of national policy directly links to an EFL teacher's preparation, as teachers are encouraged "to approach their work with a better informed, critical eye and to become genuinely learner-centred" (Ene & Mitrea 2013: 128). Adaptation to the learners' particularities is a condition for a learner-centred approach which involves the affective and social dimensions of learners and not just the content and cognitive aspects in EFL teaching-learning.

4.1. Teaching English to Digital Natives

In 2013, a survey conducted by Samsung revealed that from a total of 1911 Romanian high school students participating in the survey, 70% owned a smartphone, 60% a laptop, and 19% a tablet (Chilianu cited in Cojocnean 2015). More recently, from statistics provided by International Telecommunication Union, in 2017 among 104 countries surveyed, around 80% of the young people use the internet and are present in the online world. This represents the "singularity" envisioned by Prenksy that changed so fundamentally the situation of the learners due to the "rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades" (2001: 1). Generally, young people use their electronic devices for activities that range from socializing to gaming as well as many other leisure activities. The generation born between 1995 and 2012 is described by Twenge (2017) as the "generation shaped by the smartphone and by the concomitant rise of social media... have an Instagram account before they start high school, and do not remember a time before the internet". Undoubtedly, these digital tools are capable of bringing authentic experiences and giving EFL learners a wider understanding of English use, both inside and outside the classroom. But what are the chances of such devices being used in EFL learning by Romanian EFL learners? Are they exposed to or do they use English during such activities? If these questions receive positive answers than teaching the generation of digital natives "surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky 2001: 1) entails didactic approaches that are relevant for them, not for the past generations.

Romanian EFL learners are able to use a variety of digital tools in and out of schools and, as Tirban has argued, such digital devices may be used for pedagogical purposes during classes, as well as for non-pedagogical and entertainment reasons. In such a context EFL teachers must "widen their curricular perspectives and bring into line

their teaching with the real-life multi-cultural and multi-modal communication needs of their students who more and more live and work in a globalized society” (Tirban 2012: 78). The current real-life of Romanian learners in their contextual and social environment needs to be taken into account in EFL teaching in order to meet their communication needs and to prepare them for the globalized society in which they live. Nunan (2015) recognizes that encouraging learners to use English outside the classroom can be challenging because some EFL teachers think that using a language means speaking that language and many learners are not able to do this in the early stages of learning. But there are many other ways to use English in out-of-class contexts. Having pen friends, watching films without subtitles, writing diaries or extensive reading are some suggestions for encouraging EFL learners to interact and communicate in the TL. Engaging in activities like these also increases their motivation for EFL learning (Nunan 2015: 13). In other words, EFL learners can make significant progress in English learning by using activities from daily life as language learning opportunities and motivating them to learn.

According to Taylor, EFL teachers who are conscious of their impact on their learners’ lives only need a little determination to achieve massive improvement in their classrooms. It is of no use to bemoan our limited options and time as EFL teachers, and wait for improvements to appear from above (2009: 424). Teacher expertise is expected to replace the old-fashioned adherence to authoritarian imposition with a process-oriented approach in English teaching (Ellis, 1996; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Taylor, 2009). According to the ecological perspective (Taylor 2009), the content of teaching and cultural knowledge need to be intertwined with an understanding of the implications that English has today in economic, political and sociocultural areas (Troudi 2005). To understand such implications, the responses of undergraduate business students questioned in Pop and Sim’s (2013) survey illustrate that personal benefits represented the strongest reason for them to learn a FL. Among the personal benefits mentioned were their desire to communicate, and identity, social and economic dimensions. When studying FLs, students are motivated by issues associated with employability as looking to the benefits they can gain from acquiring the TL. They are aware of the potential for new relationships that English may promote, not only relationships with other individuals worldwide, but also the extra chances it provides in the labour markets of other countries. However, whilst most Romanian EFL learners acknowledge the advantages of mastering this language, not just for social purposes, but also for their careers, there are difficulties associated with learning English.

4.2. Integrating Learners’ Contexts

The EFL teacher who deliberately functions as a path finder for their learners can reduce the gap between EFL as a subject and the use of English in learners’ out-of-class contexts in Romania. A first step would be to alert learners to the benefits that exposure to, and the practice of, English in their daily life can bring to their progress as

language learners. Secondly, there is an acute need to bridge the gulf between the *in* and *out* of class use of English, and this can be realized by importing some of the activities and materials of English use from outside the classroom into EFL classes. I consider this to represent one of the eclectic theories we are encouraged by Ene and Mitrea (2013) to customize in the challenging context of Romanian EFL learning. Bridging this gulf provides a valid response to the challenge posed by Cozma (2017) to provide relevant sources for skills development and the practical use of English, thus supplementing the input from the textbooks.

Allotting time for discussions in pairs in which all learners can share their personal experiences of using English in out-of-class contexts would be a practical way in which to give learners the opportunity to manifest in class the social identities they construct out of class. Then, depending on the particular class the EFL teacher can encourage learners to bring their own materials into the class to share with their peers or with the class as a whole. I would suggest that this become a weekly practice, when several minutes each week can be assigned to a certain type of material to be shared: audio, video, written or read texts, etc. Learners and teacher together can agree upon a certain material to be explored by the whole class, not necessarily requiring the entire task to be finished in the class, which will give them the best chance for a community of practice.

This *import* has implications for both the *teaching* activity of EFL teachers, and for the *learning* activity of EFL learners. With regard to the EFL teachers, the first benefit would be a diversified lesson approach which will transform the few minutes of a weekly teaching activity into an interesting discovery activity. As demanding as it may be at the beginning to motivate EFL learners to bring their own materials or to share some of their personal experiences, it will be equally rewarding when it has become a common practice. Secondly, EFL teachers would have authentic materials and individualized topics for discussions brought into their lessons with the least amount of effort. Finally, this is an effective way for EFL teachers to be cognizant of the concerns, challenges, preferences and socializing habits of learners so as to provide the most relevant teaching and optimal assistance to learners in the development of their English skills. Once EFL teachers acknowledge their learners' socializing habits outside the classroom they can encourage greater participation in communities of English practice, if learners are already part of them, or if not, they can embolden learners to create such communities of practice that reflect their own interests and potential.

For EFL learners, the benefits of importing their out-of-class experiences and materials are considerable. Making a contribution to lessons transforms EFL learners from passive participants to active contributors. Working on the materials selected from their preferences, lessons would no longer be perceived as boring or uninteresting. Whilst it is not the primary goal of EFL teaching, learners within a class can get to know each other better by sharing their out-of-class experiences, and it is after all a goal of every teacher to teach a cohesive class in which learners know one another and have realistic communication with each other. It affirms for EFL learners that their own

experiences in which their agency is manifested are relevant for the EFL teacher. A further, highly important, effect of integrating learners out of class experiences is that this is an investment that positively identifies individuals inside the classroom as English users and motivation to learn English is increased when they are encouraged to communicate within their social networks, to make penfriends, to write diaries, to watch films without subtitles, to listen to music or audio materials and to read extensively.

5. Conclusion

A thorough exploration of EFL learners' culture of learning enables teachers to manage and to make optimum methodological choices in the classroom which best fit their particular context. According to the locally-oriented pedagogical strategy of looking inside the target context in order to make the best methodological decisions, EFL teachers are encouraged to adopt, in class, a methodology which considers the EFL learners' interactions with each other, with the chosen methodology, and with the context in which learning takes place. It demands that English learning be understood as a social process in the sociocultural context of digital natives who are subject to the teaching. From this perspective, learning garnered from social interaction in out-of-class contexts where EFL learners' identities are negotiated and developed by the games they play, the films they watch, their social interactions and those other activities which they engage in every day, provide for contextualized learning. As EFL learners' social context is the place where creativity and imagination are nurtured without any intervention, and within this space the agentic moves of personal English learning ecologies make a contribution to their development as English users, EFL teachers are encouraged to integrate relevant factors from their learners' contexts into their lessons planning.

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