PROCEEDINGS

The First Undergraduate Conference on ELT, Linguistics, and Literature 2013

'Showing Identity through Language'

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EXPRESSING IDEAS TO IMPROVE ENGLISH COMPETENCE

Pius N. Prihatin
piusprihatin@usd.ac.id
Sanata Dharma University

Abstract

This paper explores the fundamental considerations of using productive experience to improve English language competence. Expressing opinions, identity and feelings are significant to improve language competence. They are not only relevant for English language skills but also for all languages. This paper presents three points of view that give strong pillars of using language production activities that significantly improve language competence. First, the concept in communicative language teaching offers ideas about output hypothesis that suggests the use of language output as an activity to generate language competence. Second, ideas from engagement theory suggest kinds of activities that are significant to help language learners to contribute ideas and opinions to people outside the classroom context. Third, the integration of technology into language teaching provides discussion about the use of computer technology that opens wide the opportunities for language learners to share opinions, identities and feelings to people all over the world. The three pillars are significant to underlie the design of productive activities to improve English language competence.

Keywords: output hypothesis, technology integration, engagement, interaction, create, relate, donate

INTRODUCTION

Improving English language competence can be done in many ways. Language educationalists address the importance of receptive and productive activities to help English language learners to improve English language competence. The popular activities for receptive experiences include listening and reading, and for productive experiences include speaking and writing. The productive experiences open ways for language learners to express ideas. The experiences eventually help them to improve language competence. Developing self-expression through language involves using technology tools to produce a variety of creative works (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). Activities usually begin with a central theme or content area focus—for example, literacy for storytelling, journals and publications, science and math for reports, and arts through digital images and video production (Richardson, 2010). Language learners can work together in groups or individually. Technology-enriched activities help language learners develop and enhance their language competence and technology skills.

This paper addresses the importance of expressing ideas to improve English language competence from three points of view. Those are communicative language teaching, engagement theories, and integration of technology into language teaching. Those three pillars give better improvements of activities so that language learners and users can experience productive activities in current situation. This paper is a theoretical review that elaborates ideas that become foundations in using productive experiences to improve English language competence.

The communication abilities as the central goal of language learning and the significance of interaction in language learning process are considered important reasons of using communicative language teaching as foundation for developing the framework of integrating computer technology into the EFL curriculum. Many instructional activities of communicative language teaching have been implemented in language classroom without the use of computer technology. The use of games, role-plays, debates, tasks, and drama has been very popular as the aids to language learning. Those methods are often used in conventional language classroom without using computer technology to promote language-learning engagement. However, the existence of computer technology gives promises to increase communication opportunities of the students (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998; Kern & Warschauer, 2000). Computer-mediated communication is able to provide both synchronous and asynchronous interaction to increase communicative opportunities for learners worldwide (Savignon, 2002). Therefore, it is important to find the effective ways to integrate computer technology into the language teaching curriculum and instruction so that learners can improve their language competencies.

Communicative perspectives in English language learning

In the context of ESL/EFL teaching, learning engagement has become a crucial element due to the popularity of communicative approach to language teaching. Generally speaking, students develop their language competence through engaging in communicative activities in ESL/EFL classes. A significant shift to communicative language teaching appeared in 1980s and 1990s (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). Student engagement with authentic,

meaningful, contextualized discourse and achievement in the second language become paramount in designing foreign language lessons. Students' engagement in language learning activities will have positive impact on the increase of second and foreign language competencies (William & Burden, 1997). A language learner's engagement in meaningful, motivated communication activity using the target language is considered the best route to becoming both literate and fluent in that language (Stevik, 1980; Brown, 1994).

In the practice of communicative language teaching, meaningful interaction has been a central element in second language pedagogy. In teaching a second language, it is insufficient for the teacher to teach only linguistic competence. The teaching and learning process should also include sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). Communicative processes become as important as linguistic product, and instruction become more learner-centered and less structurally driven. Therefore, interaction in the process of language learning is central in ESL/EFL learning context.

From the communicative perspective, language instruction was viewed not just in terms of providing *comprehensible input*, a concept provided by Krashen (1982), but rather as helping students enter into variety of authentic social discourse situations and discourse communities. These are the situations and communities that the second or foreign language learners would later encounter outside the classroom. In helping those language learners entering into authentic discourse situations and communities, second and foreign language instructors are interested in the use of task-based learning, in which students engage in authentic tasks and projects (see for example Breen, 1987; Candlin, 1987; Long & Crookes, 1992; Prabhu, 1987). In this context, a task is "any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language" (William & Burden, 1997, p. 168). In carrying out the tasks, the learners exchange and negotiate meanings so that their knowledge of the language systems develops. Learner's engagement in authentic tasks and projects within such meaningful interaction between two or more participants helps them to improve communicative skills in the target language.

In many decades, developmental theories have addressed the importance of self-expression in language learning. An important theoretical repertoire was proposed by Swain's output hypothesis that mentions that learners need opportunities to produce output if they are to become fluent speakers and writers (Swain 1985). Input hypothesis provides arguments that learners' output contributes to interlanguage development (Ellis, 1994). In her study on immersion classrooms in Canada, Swain (1985) claims that learners need to be "pushed" from semantic into syntactic processing mode. The leaners are required to encode comprehensible messages in order to propel their language learning. In line of her argument she claims that "when learners experience communicative failure, they are pushed into making their output more precise, coherent, and appropriate" (Ellis, 1994, p. 282). The three hypotheses become the foundation that interaction takes important roles in improving language competence of the language learners.

Another argument suggests that healthy cognitive development is dependent upon self-expression and communication. Piaget argues that an individual's personal construction of knowledge is the result of social transmission stimulations (Siegler, 1991). Learners' active participation in communication experiences that include the mental manipulation of ideas facilitates the improvement of knowledge (Ginsburg & Opper, 1987). When learners learn language, learners need opportunities to paraphrase information, ask questions for clarification, test their ideas, and expand on information through expository writing (Woolfolk, 1998).

In the context of English as second language teaching, English instructors have used many kinds of methods to provide students with the opportunities to participate in language learning activities to promote second language acquisition. In the communicative language programs, such activities as games, group discussion, debates, and short drama performances have been used in communicative language classroom to give learners to individually involve in classroom interaction (Savignon, 1971, Richards & Rodgers, 1986, Celce-Murcía, 2001). These methods also accept the importance of more traditional teaching methods such as lecturing and skillpractice because these activities are important in preparing students to experience the real communication activities. However, the traditional teaching methods of lecturing and skill practicedo not dominate the learning activities because the bigger portion of the classroom activities is full with students' interaction using the target language. In addition, task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Candlin & Murphy's, 1987; Ellis, 2009; Prabhu, 1987) has also been very popular. Tasks are used to provide opportunities for communicating in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ellis, 2009) especially for enhancing more individualized instruction for the students.

The opportunities for productive experiences require active participation from language learners. Language learners are encouraged to fully engage in expressing ideas, feelings, and identity using target language. However, language engagement does not occur automatically. Language learners are required to carry out certain experiences so that they develop engagement in English language learning. The following section explores ideas from the engagement theories that offer kinds of activities in which language learners can carry out to improve their abilities to express ideas through language.

Engagement in language production

Engagement theory has contributed to the development of curriculum design to help language learners to improve language competence. The theory is not directly derived from other theoretical frameworks for learning. However, it has much in common with many frameworks in learning theories. Shneiderman (1998) first introduced the theory by providing a guiding philosophy for teachers so that they can adapt the principles to their personal style, course contents, student population, and available technology. Engagement theory emphasizes meaningful learning and it is consistent with constructivist approaches. "The main underlying assumption of constructivism is that individuals are actively involved right from birth in constructing personal meaning that is their own personal understanding, from their experience (William & Burden, 1997, p. 21)." Moreover, Engagement Theory emphasizes collaboration among peers and a community of learners. It can be aligned with situated learning theories. Learning collaboratively with others has been suggested by sociocognitive theories. The involvement of other people in learner's life significantly influences his mental development (Vygotsky, 1978). Other people help learners to enhance learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them.

The basic principle of engagement theory is related with the constructivist learning model. According to the developers, engaged learning means that all student activities involve active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, and evaluation (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998).Specifically, Engagement Theory comprises three components:

1. **Relating**: learning activities that occur in a group context
2. **Creating**: learning activities that are project-based
3. **Donating**: learning activities that have an outside (authentic) focus

Relating, that is, collaborative work, encourages students to "clarify and verbalize their problems, thereby facilitating solutions" (Kearsley and Shneiderman, 1998, p. 20). Creating involves student participation in the development of their assessment tasks: "students have to define the project and focus their efforts on application of ideas to a specific context" (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998, p. 20). Donating "stresses the value of making a useful contribution while learning" (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998, p. 20), a feature that motivates learners because they are engaged with an activity they value.

Foreign language teaching practices are based on the assumption that learners' engagement in learning activities gives positive impacts on foreign and second language acquisition. Language learning activities carried out by the students can be designed based on the ideas of relating, creating and donating. Therefore, engagement theory elaborates what skills students need in order to effectively participate in productive and creative activities. In addition, with the improvement of computer technology, engagement theory can become an effective foundation for developing the framework to establish computer technology integration models to improve students' communicative ability in foreign language. The following section addresses the issues of integrating computer technology to facilitate students' engagement in productive activities to improve English competence.

Computer integration into language learning

Language learning engagement becomes very crucial in computer-based language learning. Computer technology have the capacity to facilitate people to access to other people as well as to information and data (Kern & Warchauer, 2000) so that it can serve as medium for local and global communication and provide accesses to authentic materials. Moreover, computer interactions are also potential to enhance communication skills and strengthen language through computer support group interactions (Bourdon, 1999). The use of computer technology in language classroom improves the target language exposure, which is important for enhancing second and foreign language acquisition. More importantly, computer technology gives language learners wider opportunity to actively participate in real communication using the target language.

There have been many examples of successful technology integration programs that are grounded in the separate subject approach. However, there is no single model or program that is applicable to all situations. Technology integration is not a 'one fits all' practice (Wepner, Tao, & Ziomek, 2006) where teachers do the same things for their students. The success of the integration should be measured based on the contextual situation of the school or, even more specifically, the group of the students. The engagement in computer-based learning depends upon the sociocultural context that shapes the interaction using computers where students learn via multimedia mode (Kern &Warchauer, 2000). Contextual situation should also become an important consideration in foreign language teaching. Graves (2000) suggests that the question about how to teach a subject does not have one answer. The answer to the question "will depend on the context in which the teacher teaches" (Graves, 2000, p. 13). In summary, computer-based language teaching does not represent a particular technique or method but it constitutes amalgamation of ways by which students communicate via computer technology, interpret and construct information using the computer technology.

Computer integration carries the meaning of full-time, daily operation within the lesson (Gorder, 2008) where teachers consciously decide to designate certain tasks and responsibility to technology (Bauer & Kenton, 2005). Hooper and Rieber (1999) described five phases of teacher's use of technology: (1) familiarization, (2) utilization, (3) integration, (4) re-orientation, and (5) evolution. It was asserted that most teachers only reach the utilization stage. In this stage teachers are already satisfied with the limited use of technology and tend to cancel the use of it when they experience signs of troubles. They lack of positive commitment to find better ways to break the barriers to the successful utilization of computer technology. Hooper and Rieber (1999) further explain that in the true integration the teachers experience a "breakthrough phase" (p. 254) where computer plays significant roles in the success of the lesson.

Jaffee (1997) suggests four highly important pedagogical principles for the implementation in the classroom where technology is integrated: active learning, mediation, collaboration, and interactivity. Active learning using technology constitutes the interaction between the student and the content in which the interaction allows knowledge building and construction. Using technology for active learning keeps students focused, engaged, and motivated (Barak, Lipson, & Lerman, 2006). Mediation is interaction between the teacher and the students to solve problems, respond to questions, and discuss topics relating to the course. Collaboration is interaction among students through questions and information sharing. Interactivity is the principle that represents the greatest pedagogical potential for learning using technology. This principle is consistent with the principles of language learning. Interactivity is the master concept where active participation is building the understanding and knowledge through interaction with other students, teachers, and resources using technology.

The core principles of Engagement Theory are consistent with the purpose of communicative language teaching. The teaching learning processes in communicative language learning lessons should involve the learners in the experience of meaningful communication (Savignon, 2002; Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Widdowson, 1984). Meaningful communication is accomplished through collaborative activities among students, teachers, and other people outside the classroom. The idea of relate, create and donate in Engagement Theory provides the basis for providing meaningful collaboration and authentic experience of communication. The theory posits three primary means to accomplish engagement: (1) an emphasis on collaborative efforts, (2) project-based assignments, and (3) useful contribution to wider context of learning environments. Kearsley & Shneiderman, (1998) suggest that these three methods result in learning that is creative, meaningful, and authentic. Engagement might happen without technology, but the use of technology provides more possibilities for such engagement to occur.

The idea of collaboration in learning has been considered as an important aspect of successful learning for a long time especially when constructivist principles of learning is used in designing instruction. Collaboration refers to a recursiveprocess where two or more people or organizations work together to realize shared goals. Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs (Gerlach, 1994). Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003) argue that collaborative learning is an important way for creating authentic and deep learning. "Cognition occurs not only 'in the head' ... but in the objective elements of communication among individuals" (Cole & Engestrom, 1993, p. 3). Warschauer (1997) argues that computer-mediated communication encourages collaborative learning in language classroom in five ways. First, computer-mediated interaction is more powerful than text-based interaction. Tex-based interaction has been used for a long time in language pedagogy. In free-writing activities, for example, students share their compositions written or typed on papers. The use of computer-mediated interaction enables the reader to edit and reedit the composition while rapidly interacting with the writer. Second, computer-mediated online learning allows learners to engage in many-to-many interaction. An individual student can initiate interaction with any or all of the others. Thus, it opens the opportunity of participation in interaction activities. Third, computer-mediated communication allows time- and place-independence interaction. Learners can write and receive messages at any time of the day from any computer with the Internet connection. Fourth, while place-dependent interaction can be conducted in a local network system, the Internet is able to help students to engage in long distance exchanges to people around the world. Fifth, the access to authentic information is crucialin communicative language teaching, Hypermedia allows learners to access up-to-date and authentic information that can be incorporated into the classroom collaborative activities. Through the interaction in students are building their knowledge instead of relying on simple memorization skills.

The aspect of contribution to wider context of learning in Engagement Theory might become the most typical nature of computer integration in English language learning environment. Furthermore, it may become the most challenging nature in the integration of computer technology into language instruction. It is common that in the accomplishment of project-based language learning the students display the final products in the school or the wider community, and become a stimulus for thought and action for other students, teachers and local community (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009). Students may publish the result of the project in a web blog that can be created on

group or class basis. Another option is that the students may present the result in the form of a wall magazine that can be presented along the hallway so that other people outside the classroom can enjoy the learning product. Some other English teachers require students to perform skits of drama or poster exhibitions at the end of the semester in which the faculty members and students from other classes are invited to watch. Those activities have been very effective in motivating students to carry out the learning process.

The integration of computer technology enables learners to share what they have done not only within the school environment but also outside the school to the greater community of the world. Students can be encouraged to use production or editing software such as Corel Draw, Adobe Photoshop, Sony Sound Force, and Microsoft Video Maker to design production of language learning in the form of stories, poems, pictures or movies. Students can create interesting posters, wall magazine pages, and recorded drama skits that can be shared with other people outside the class. The use of Internet enables students to use the Web to publish their learning production in the form of text or multimedia materials to share with partner classes or with the general public (Kern & Warchauer, 2000). Outside consumers have the potential for generating intense motivation and help students to clarify their work (Shneiderman, 1998). Therefore, using outside parties as the target of language project production can motivate learners to do their best in accomplishing the projects.

CONCLUSION

The three pillars above should be strong enough to give inspiration to students and teachers to use creative and productive experiences to improve English competence. Many language learners are often reluctant to express ideas, identities, feelings, etc using the target language they learn. Consequently, they do not improve their language skills effectively. Considering the advance of networking technology, the elaboration above should positively encourage people to use the technology to develop their capacity in foreign languages. The digital culture should be focused on helping people to improve language competence by sharing opinions, identities, feelings, experiences, and hopes. Many activities using advanced technology are often exiting. However, it is not enough to use the technology only for pleasure. People, especially young people, should also consider the significance of the technology to improve their language competence. The activities such as digital storytelling, web blog development and discussion forum through the Internet will develop students' opportunities to express their ideas, feelings, and identities. Such kinds of activities should be encouraged both by the language instructors and by the language learners themselves to improve positive language learning experiences.

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