

## RELATIONSHIPS AND AGENCY AS KEY CONCEPTS IN AN ESP LEARNING COMMUNITY

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***Abstract:** Lifelong learning has become a priority in the academic curriculum. Nowadays, education is confronted with complex challenges and a significant number of them focus on competences required for the labour market and entrepreneurship. Therefore, learning languages at the university needs to adapt to this new approach of responding not only to linguistic and communicative skills but also to integrative ones. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the results of an experiment conceived for 1<sup>st</sup> year students in the Faculty of Food Processing Technology. Beyond language and culture acquisition, experiencing learning through integrated collaborative tasks has raised students' awareness regarding the specificity and efficiency of the co-creation process within a community.*

***Keywords:** awareness, co-creation, collaborative, learning community*

### **Introduction**

According to a recent European Commission Proposal (2018) on key competence for lifelong learning, there is an increased urge to define skills “necessary for employability, personal fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion”. Language learning needs to undergo a shift from its main communicative purpose to a more inclusive, integrative and collaborative one. As educational practitioners, we cannot envisage languages as tools of communication exclusively but revisit their utility in continuously changing environments. The question which might subsequently emerge is: To what extent does the language class facilitate collaborative tasks and the co-creation of a community?

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tertiary education goes beyond knowledge and its assessment, it implies discovering language and culture in more specialized and contextualized situations. Moreover, from a holistic perspective, language learning gives to students several opportunities of engagement at a communicational, social and cultural level. It is about how students use language and culture to respond to their needs or co-create meaning either for themselves or the others.

### **Central concepts of the ecological mindset**

The preliminary research that I present in this paper has been developed within the ecological framework of learning. From the human ecology perspective, the individual and the environment are viewed as interconnected, as part of a network, and thus mutual influence may emerge as a response to

diverse interactions. As Bronfenbrenner underlines: “The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded”. (2005: 107)

The ecological approach views the learning process in all its complexity: human resources (teachers and learners), multiple layers of communication or miscommunication, patterns of interaction and learning taking into consideration factors of context and an entire web of emerging activities and feedback. Van Lier (2004) distinguishes several central concepts which actively engage in the complex learning process:

- relationships;
- context;
- emergent patterns;
- quality;
- value;
- critical perspective;
- variability;
- diversity;
- agency.

It is not within the purpose of this article to discuss all the elements that build the architecture of the ecological approach. In this paper I will focus on two of them, namely relationships and agency in the context of the ESP class for Life Sciences students, specialising in Food Processing. However, it is worth mentioning the powerful interrelatedness of all these core elements, thus, every transformation triggers the reshaping of the general web and the possibilities for learning experience to emerge or not.

### **Specificity of relationships in the ESP class**

The keystone for the activities developed in the ESP classes is learning language and culture with a particular focus on the specific communicative needs and practices appropriate for a given community at a given time. In Higher Education (HE) the ESP practitioners are supposed to help their learners to acquire tools and develop skills in order to function in the academic and working environments. (Basturkmen, 2006: 17) Therefore, the concept of ‘relationship’ is not restricted to teacher-learner dichotomy but it goes beyond it, englobing articulations with all the elements of the learning community. From an ecological perspective, the relationships between elements of the environment and their interactions at various times confer specific dynamics. In the human sphere, we can “distinguish relationships at physical, social and symbolic levels. These three levels interact in multiple ways and arrangements.

(van Lier, 2010:4) ESP students interact with two types of knowledge and skills: on the one hand, the professional content, transmitted both theoretically and practically, and, on the other hand, the linguistic one, tailored to the first category. Numerous relationships are established among the physical, social and symbolic areas of the class ecosystem. For example, students interact with physicality in terms of the tools they use to facilitate their learning experiences: mobile phones, books, hands-out, writing instruments. Socially speaking, there are multiple opportunities to connect with others (peers, teachers, family, friends) and they are all sources of emerging learning. The symbolic world is represented by the web of ideas, opinions, belief systems or stories.

The ESP class represents a unique space, both spatial and temporal, in which affordances are possible. Affordances are “relationships of possibility” (van Lier, 2010:4) in the sense that they facilitate interactions or joint projects and co-creation of a specific community. Within the learning environment, van Lier (2004: 95) points out “language affordances, whether natural or cultural, direct or indirect are relations of possibility among language users.” What the ecological mindset creates is a world of blurred boundaries in which teachers do not have a special or superior status, they act as facilitators, as ‘language users’, as active elements of the learning community. It is of utmost importance that learners live in an environment where language affordances are easy to be accessed. However, language affordances are not similar among learners. There are learning environments which offer more possibilities for learning a language or specific knowledge and others with a more limited or poorer potential. Although the Romanian social environment is rich in opportunities and the academic context offers a relatively wide range of activities and possibilities (student exchanges, for example), ESP learners do not exploit these affordances to the extent their teachers expect them to do. This last remark leads me to the second concept I would like to focus upon in this paper, namely agency.

### **The concept of agency in an ESP learning community**

We commonly use notions such as *motivation* or *autonomy* to explain why a learner is successful in his/her learning or not. According to van Lier (2004) agency goes beyond these concepts and it is described in terms of movement. In ecology, living organisms need movement in order to survive, grow, feed, protect themselves; it is a way of manifesting their reaction to the surrounding environment. Similarly, learners have to move, to perform and to engage in simple or complex activities in order to learn. For instance, if they want to understand a scientific article they must move their specialized vocabulary, to look for new words, to make correlations between their

knowledge and the foreign language, etc. In addition, cognitive input is not sufficient, in the above-mentioned movement, the learner engages emotions, feelings, thoughts or imagination.

Agency can manifest itself at several levels and under multiple forms of expression. However, the absence of agency in learning is also possible. A learner can choose not to learn, his passivity will not lead to learning. On the contrary, students who want to be successful in their learning process and attain their targets have to learn how to manage their forms of agency and how to orient them towards their goals. In our academic environment, the lack of forms of agency has a significant impact on a high number of students. Further investigation could bring to light the sources of the absence of agency.

Although this concept aims at the individual and his/her level of implication in an activity, the environment is not to be disregarded either. Language classes whose curriculum is based on agency-related activities encouraging the enrichment of the volume of learning opportunities. Teachers should be preoccupied with assuring the implementation and development of dynamic and rich environments, agency-oriented and thus, stimulating the learning process. The ESP course has a certain particularity: the scientific know-how is not within the teacher's horizon of knowledge, but within the learner's. In this case, the potentiality of the class environment is discussed in terms of:

- co-understanding - teachers and students jointly discover and analyse learning phenomena;
- co-creation of meaning, actions and feelings;
- co-resolution in the sense that both parties try to come up with solutions while negotiating them and employing their agency in various ways.

### **Learning communities and their role in the ESP class ecosystem**

Defining the concepts of relationships and agency plays a major part in describing the ESP class architecture. These two concepts are vital for the ecosystem of the language class not only as a process, but as defining strings that confer flexibility and adaptability too. The aim of this living ecosystem, in our case, is to make students engage in a learning community whose product is acquiring a new tool which will help them to express their knowledge and professional skills. The learning community appears to be a potentially powerful integrative 'hive' where participants cooperate at different levels. In addition, educators are encouraged to consciously create a coherent

environment in the ESP class community to stimulate and to help learners acquire learning tools. As Dragoescu (2014) emphasizes, the poor status of certain learning tools triggers a specific emergency to raise students' awareness of cognitive, metacognitive and communicative strategy use in learning a language.

Rich linguistic, cultural and communicational environments can both challenge and encourage learners to make use of their agency in more self-directed ways and move to superior levels of development. My manifesto for creation and co-creation of learning communities goes beyond my role of educator and highlights the peer-to-peer interaction whose particularity is that it escapes the ESP class borders. Students can learn from each other inside or outside the traditional language class, in a captive environment. In other words, ESP learning is not limited to the English course, it can happen anywhere, in different types of contexts, academic or not, and each interaction with new elements can lead to new affordances.

ESP learning within a community should be a potentially safe and stimulating means of being in touch with language and acquire it differently and creatively. Members of the learning community are supposed to develop skills like empathy, sharing, communicating and supporting each other. Moreover, co-creation should function complementarily to the co-learning process, teachers and students being involved as equal members of the community, sharing the same objectives and practices. A dense network of affordances is to emerge in order to develop the learners' learning and adaptive skills. The relationship between each member's input and output gives a flexible dimension to the learning process.

## **Conclusions**

The paper has analysed two core concepts, which contribute to the dynamics of an ESP learning community. Environmental factors and their impact are to be considered carefully in relation with affordances leading to learning experiences. Although the web of relationships and agency, seen in terms of movement, are significant elements of the ESP class as an ecosystem, there are other elements which need careful consideration. The short description in this paper highlights the interrelatedness of these two elements and how they may stimulate emergent learning among the members of a community.

Nevertheless, more profound research will highlight other elements responsible for the successful functioning of learning communities and ways in which they can live and thrive while empowering their members.

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