

# Experiences of EFL Learners in the English Classroom\*



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## Abstract

This paper presents the views related to learners' constructions of themselves as EFL learners of English and their perceptions of English as a subject learned in the classroom in relation to the existing literature. Learners' classroom experiences are presented with respect to four main key areas under which specific and pertinent issues are discussed. These four key areas include learners' responses to topics and activities, learners' participation in lessons, learners' rapport with the English teacher, and learners' language of interaction and conversation. In fact, such distinctive features of formal language learning can be generally reflected and represented in any EFL classroom setting. As classroom language learning appears decontextualized and seems disconnected from real life and from any meaningful context in which people interact and communicate, by exploring these domains, it is hoped that EFL learners' classroom experiences can be better understood.

**Keywords:** Experiences; EFL Learners; English Classroom

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## **Introduction**

The language classroom is in fact the key site for learning English. This is because the classroom is the social context where the teacher, who is an expert English practitioner, intentionally meets and interacts with learners, who seek to become proficient second language users. In this case, it seems that the classroom is where the learners could learn and use the target language with the teacher as well as with fellow classmates. The classroom is also where learners could learn from a prescribed syllabus and a learning framework (Eraut, 2002) that are purposely drawn up to help develop their language proficiency so that they become proficient target language users. Taking into consideration the issues of the prescribed learning framework, interaction, teachers and language that learners normally experience in the language classroom, the writer will present the learners' classroom experiences concerning four key areas.

## **Responses to topics and activities**

This refers to how the learners view and respond to specific language learning topics and activities covered and conducted in the lessons. One of the related issues with reference to learning from a prescribed syllabus is that there is a tendency on the part of the teacher to ensure that learners learn from the prescribed framework. Lightbown and Spada (1999) assert that a danger is that attention is focused on the language itself, rather than information that is carried by the language. Likewise, another danger could be that the teacher concentrates on covering the syllabus without actually engaging the learners in meaningful learning. Insights into these issues can be presented in relation to how the learners respond to topics and activities as essay writing, writing as homework, and speaking or oral activities.

### ***Essay Writing***

For essay writing, time constraint and topics can be examined. Most EFL students often find writing a difficult skill to master and often complain that there is not enough time to finish writing in time. Thus, the teacher not only can give students a practice in writing long essays but also in writing under examination conditions which reflect the importance placed on examinations in the learning of English in many Asian countries. With reference

to topics, a number of EFL learners believe that they cannot write essays well unless they choose the topics or have personal experience on the specified topics. As a result, they just could not express themselves well in writing. The teacher may in fact try to provide input for learners through different related activities to prepare for essay writing. However, despite the teacher's effort to provide input, learners may not be able to write. This seems to provide clear evidence that teaching or merely providing linguistic input does not necessarily lead to learning. This seems to be at variance with the view adopted by a mainstream SLA that linguistic input could lead to learning.

### ***Writing as homework***

This can be an extension of learners' classroom activities. As a matter of fact, a study by North and Pillay (2002) reveals that homework in the form a written product seems to be a preference with teachers in their study. Likewise, this seems to reflect EFL learners' experiences with written homework in the Thai context.

Lightbown (2000) presents an argument on the notion of 'practice makes perfect.' In her review on one of the generalisations made on SLA research on second language teaching, Lightbown states:

*When 'practice' is defined as opportunities for meaningful language use (both receptive and productive) and for thoughtful, effortful practice of difficult linguistic features, then the role of practice is clearly meaningful and even essential (p. 443).*

In the light of this argument, it seems that not all learners perceive all the written work given as practice as essentially meaningful or sufficient to lead them to developing a higher degree of accuracy and fluency in their writing skills. In fact, North and Pillay (2002) reveal that in general the English teachers in their study do not seem to evaluate the overall effectiveness of homework. Rather, it is the learners who seem to be evaluating the effectiveness of homework.

### ***Speaking and oral activities***

With reference to oral work in English lessons, many EFL learners favour such activities. As activities seem to be more under learners' control as they get to do the talking rather than being orchestrated by the teacher. It can be an effective way of learning English. In other words, a social and collaborative activity with a chance to participate in the lesson is by and large favourable to learn the language. This also suggests that students are able to get control of the class activity which is not part of the conventional method of formal teaching and learning.

However, on a related issue, not every oral activity conducted in class is favourable. Among other things, oral activities seem to depend on 'topics.' If the topics are not within students' knowledge or interest, they often find that it is very difficult for them to contribute to the discussion or oral activity.

Several second language researchers such as Nunan (1989), Johnson (1989), McDonough (1995) and Breen and Littlejohn (2000) state that learners often have their own learning agenda. According to these researchers, learners' agendas are diverse. They comprise among other things the learners' own learning priorities, their changing needs, their different preferred strategies and styles of learning, the different value and functions they give to the language classroom as well as the prescribed topics and activities as the learners themselves revealed earlier. More importantly, these agendas are shaped by the learners' prior knowledge and experiences, including their earlier experiences of classroom learning. In fact, learners' experiences of natural learning, for example their early experiences of learning English at home, in the wider context outside school and their experiences with English through participating in school activities are attributive.

It can be argued that EFL learners seem to believe that their learning of English in the classroom should not be dictated by particular topics from the syllabus. These seem to constrain their writing, speaking and thinking skills to the extent that they might perceive themselves as not being able to write or use English in discussions.

EFL learners are usually keen to have oral activities. With oral activities, in general, it seems that teachers should not adhere too strictly to the prescribed syllabus. This is because in the effort to cover the syllabus, teachers may overlook students' interests and experiences that can be utilised to make their learning of English more meaningful and

functional. Likewise, with the issue of written work and homework, teachers should ensure that all the work helps learners to develop their English. In fact, what learners seem to want is for their learning to be more meaningful and more importantly, to connect their classroom English learning experiences to real life.

In what follows, the writer will present another aspect to learners' classroom experiences, that is, how learners reportedly participate and interact in lessons.

## **Participation in lessons**

This refers to the different ways in which the learners reportedly participate and interact in the lessons. According to Allwright (2000), it is very difficult to predict if learners do learn the target language from their overt behaviour. It is to bear in mind that learners do not always learn from engaging in interaction or participating in lessons. In other words, learners' overt behaviour in lessons does not necessarily reflect that they are only learning the target language. Instead, according to several researchers, in the classroom, learners learn among other things - to become part of the community of practice so that more effective learning could occur (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991), to 'survive' in order to avoid social problem and maintain social equilibrium in the classroom (e.g. Allwright, 1996) and to navigate the opportunities and constraints provided by classroom discourse (e.g. Breen, 2001; 2002).

In participatory response, learners normally provide an answer or answers because they believe they need to respond to the teacher. This is the kind of behaviour learners believe that the teacher expects when he or she asks questions in lessons. Another important point about participatory response is that the response provided by learners may not be much of substance, as according to van Lier (1996), the answer is normally in the form of information that the teacher expects learners to know or the kind that teacher has in mind. Knight (2001) also points out that the question and answer session for the learners is just as an activity of exchanging information.

The ways learners participate in the lessons can be perceived from two main perspectives. Firstly, it appears that some learners participate in the lessons in the way they believe they should as learners. This relates to the notion proposed by Wright (1987) that students may be merely acting "in role" as learners based on the status they believe accord

to them in the classroom situation. Secondly, learners may believe in presenting themselves as valuing English study so they can put on performances (Goffman, 1959). In the classroom, they can put on a certain performance probably because they believe that they are challenged to develop their competence in a setting over which they feel they have very little control (Graue and Walsh, 1998). In this respect, learners' participation in the classroom may be seen as merely performances that they assert to adapt to the routine of the teaching and learning situations. Thus, the way learners behave and participate in the classroom can seem similar to Allwright's (1996) idea of social survival.

The writer will present another perspective to the learners' classroom experience. In specific, this relates to rapport learners have with their English teacher.

## **Rapport with the English teacher**

This concerns learners' rapport with their teacher and how the relationship seems to have influenced learners' dispositions towards learning English in the classroom. Perceived as an expert English practitioner, the teacher is a mediator who can help enhance learners' learning as they try to make sense of their language learning experiences (Kozulin, 1998; Williams and Burden, 1997). At the same time, the teacher can provide the scaffolding to support learners especially in the early stages of learning (Woods, 1986). The teacher also seems to hold the power in relation to whether learners have access to assert themselves in speaking and using English (Norton, 2000). In other words, the teacher seems to hold the key as to whether learners have an opportunity to practise various language skills. Likewise, the teacher is the person who can provide learners with emotional support as they experience a change of identity whenever they use a second language. Evidently, what is important is rapport between learners and the teacher, as this seems to shape the learners' learning and development in the language.

Having a teacher with a good sense of humour and who would entertain learners with stories seem favourable. A fun and relaxed atmosphere can encourage learners to use more English to respond to the teacher. As in the study by Tse (2000) where it is found that the university students felt that the teacher's attention and sympathy contributed to their progress and helped maintained their interest in learning the language. Likewise, in a study by Lin (2001), the learners' positive response to English lessons and show of confidence

that they could succeed in their present and future studies seemed to be closely related to the learners' relationship with the teacher. The teacher's various ways of interacting with the learners in the classroom as well as outside through talking about problems related their learning, seemed to have influenced the learners' positive response to English and English learning.

Evidently, what seems important for EFL learners in their formal learning of English in the classroom is access to social, natural and meaningful relationships with their language teacher. This seems more important than the knowledge that the teacher is trying to impart. According to Wenger (1998), teachers apart from parents and other educators themselves constitute learning resources. This is not so much in terms of the specific content of the teachers' pedagogic knowledge but with reference to their status as members of the English language speaking community. The teachers themselves are a powerful teaching asset. Teachers by trying to step away from their identity as teachers as defined by an institutional role can help provide learners with a chance to interact more with the teacher whom in the classroom is the most knowledgeable in English. According to Wenger (*ibid.*), it is this kind of access to experience that learners need in order to in order feel connected to the subject matter. This seems to resonate with the social view of language learning where learning a language does not only involve social and collaborative activity but also encompasses access to participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). On this note, the following section will focus on notions of learners' use of English for interaction and conversation with their teachers and peers.

## **Language of interaction and conversation**

This relates to learners' view of the options and choices available for speaking English with their teachers and peers during learning activities and in non-learning circumstances. The issue of speaking English in the classroom from the point of view of how learners use the language will be presented, which will help illuminate the importance of language as a tool for thinking.

Learners' willingness to speak English more in informal situations should be addressed as they probably feel that they have more opportunities to speak as the teacher does not dominate the lesson. In addition, it is possible that during these informal

conditions, learners feel that the teacher does not require them to speak accurate English. Tsui (1996), for example, reported that one of the reasons learners in her study seemed reluctant to speak English was because they felt the teacher expected them to produce highly accurate utterances. Thus, by creating these informal conditions within the context of formal learning in the classroom would help learners feel more enthusiastic to communicate in English.

In general, in EFL university settings, learners tend to code-switch when they interact with one another either for the purposes of dealing with classroom task or in friendly conversations. However, among Thai students, using English only with Thai friends in group activities and socially seems awkward. This can strongly be influenced by the issue of identity and by peer pressure, fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence. Thus, using the first language, Thai, is preferable as it seems to be faster and does not require much thinking to convey messages across. This seems to resonate with the findings by Lee (1997) and Lin (2001) on the power of using learners' first language for explaining and amplifying topics that provide an effective means of guiding learners to understanding. This seems to confirm the notion that language is a powerful tool for thinking.

On the surface, learners in general seem to be using English only for particular purposes in the classroom, namely when required for interacting and participating in lesson activities or specifically for pedagogic purposes. For social activities, they would use their mother tongue. However, it should be noted that some studies (e.g. Lin, 2001; Lee, 1997) reveal that even if the focus of the classroom interaction is specifically on learning English, using the learners' mother tongue can help them to develop in the target language. If attempts are made to help learners express what they say in their first language to English, and more importantly, use what the learners say as a learning resource, students would probably be able to learn to speak English better.



## Conclusion

In this paper, the writer's attempt has been to portray learners' experiences in the English classroom based on the existing literature and his own EFL experience. Four key areas: responses to topics and activities, participation in lessons, rapport with the English teacher and language of interaction and conversation are discussed.

In brief, learners can perceive their classroom experiences as a tension between formal and informal types of learning. Formal learning seems to be dictated by the syllabus and by the learners doing what the teacher seems to want. Informal learning, on the other hand, seems to relate to the idea that, to a certain extent, the teacher provides opportunities for learners to participate in their learning. This includes the teacher allowing learners to use English orally, to speak in the lesson and to express their opinion where, in turn, the teacher seems to be listening to them and accepting their ideas and sharing stories with them openly.

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