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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PROMOTING EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OMAN

by

Jihan Sulaiman Al Naabi

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Approved:

Dr. Sarah Gordon Major Professor	Dr. Karin DeJonge-Kannan Committee Member
Dr. Maria Spicer-Escalante Committee Member	Dr. Bradford J. Hall Department Head

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

2020

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ABSTRACT

New Perspectives on Promoting EFL Teaching and Learning in Oman

by

Jihan Sulaiman Al Naabi: Master of Second Language Teaching
Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Dr. Sarah Gordon
Department: Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies

This portfolio is an accumulation of work that the author accomplished during her study in the program of Master of Second Language Teaching at Utah State University. It is an outcome of the author's personal teaching experiences, insights gained from her master's study, and several class observations as well.

The portfolio comprises three primary portions: (1) teaching perspectives, (2) research perspectives, and (3) an annotated bibliography. The teaching perspectives revolve around the author's beliefs on the role of both teachers and students in L2 classrooms, the communicative teaching of grammar, and the value of a positive learning environment. The research perspectives' section involves two papers written during different courses in the MSLT program. The annotated bibliography reviews literature on topics about task-based language teaching and learning.

(101 pages)

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACTFL = American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

DLI = Dual Language Immersion

EFL = English as a Foreign Language

EIL = English as an International Language

ELF = English as a Lingua Franca

ELT = English Language Teaching

ESL = English as a Second Language

FL = Foreign Language

L1 = First Language / Native Language

L2 = Second Language

MSLT = Master of Second Language Teaching

NCSSFL = National Council of State Supervisors for Languages

NESTs = Native English Language Teachers

NL: Native Language

NNESTs = Non-Native English Language Teachers

SLA = Second Language Acquisition

TESOL = Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

TPS = Teaching Philosophy Statement

USU = Utah State University

WEs = World Englishes

ZPD = Zone of Proximal Development

INTRODUCTION

This portfolio is a concrete outcome of the knowledge I have gained throughout my study in the Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) program at Utah State University (USU). My portfolio is composed of three main sections, shaping my new vision of second language teaching and learning.

The first section is the **"teaching perspectives"**, including my teaching philosophy statement (TPS) as the main foci of this portfolio. In my TPS, I delineate the role of both teachers and learners in effective second language (L2) classrooms. I also describe my insights, based on second language acquisition (SLA) research, on the communicative way of teaching grammar, and the value of establishing positive learning environment in L2 classrooms. The second section is the **"research perspectives"**, comprising two language papers. The first one addresses the theme of teaching English as an international language in Oman. It specifically highlights some of the deep-rooted myths and suggests certain pedagogical implications for better learning and teaching outcomes in the era of world Englishes (WEs). The second paper focuses on literature circles, as an effective instructional strategy in L2 classrooms. It particularly describes its principles, its way of implementation, and its various learning benefits. The last section is **"an annotated bibliography"** in which I review the literature on the theme of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and learning, exploring its different topics and relating it to my teaching experiences. The development of all papers in the above three sections stems from my enthusiasm to contribute to establishing more effective English language learning conditions for my students in Oman.

TEACHING PERSPECTIVES

PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Before joining the MSLT program, I had been teaching EFL in my country, Oman, for eight years. I had taught different grade levels from elementary to secondary classes (grade one to grade ten) at the same school. Each academic year I had been teaching two different classes, one from the elementary and the other from the upper-level classes. At first blush, I thought it would be too difficult to teach two different age groups on the same day and I was wondering if I could cope with that situation. However, over time I found myself enjoying teaching both groups. From each grade level I gained different experiences ranging from applying different teaching strategies and methods to dealing with different personalities and interests.

After completing my master study in the MSLT program, I intend to teach both elementary and secondary classes or either one of them. Therefore, I have written this portfolio with these two student populations in my mind. Put simply, the portfolio along with the experience and knowledge I have gained in the MSLT program are all dedicated to my future students in Oman.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY STATEMENT

Introduction

Like many other teachers, I started teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) with great enthusiasm and passion. I was eager to apply what I had gained in my undergraduate study of theoretical perspectives and classroom practices in EFL teaching. I looked forward to assisting Omani students to develop their English proficiency and L2 development. As I became involved with teaching, I found myself having to follow step by step lessons as a part of a structured curriculum. While organized around general themes such as food, sports, daily routines, and many other topics relevant to the Omani students, unfortunately it did not prepare them to be able to communicate effectively beyond the walls of the classroom. It is true that we were given the space to adapt the curriculum to some extent, yet we were still required to cover most of the curriculum materials in preparing students for written final exams.

Ultimately, my dissatisfaction with my students' overall language gains and communicative abilities led me to reflect on my approach to teaching English. I noticed that after teaching the same students for some years, there was no noticeable development in their proficiency level and definitely not in their communicative competence. This realization led met to enroll in the Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) program.

During my study in the MSLT program, I have envisioned the teaching process through a more optimistic and inspiring lens. My perspective of what contributes to effective teaching has been reformed and will continue to evolve throughout my teaching career.

Therefore, in my teaching philosophy statement, I will first address the role of both teacher and students in a communicative classroom. I will then highlight how grammar can be taught through a meaning-based approach and in support of communication. Finally, I will describe how to establish a positive learning environment in the L2 classroom. I believe that applying these aspects in my EFL classroom will yield fruitful outcomes in my students' proficiency levels as well as satisfy my desire to be an effective EFL teacher.

The Role of Teachers and Students in Communicative Language Classrooms

In this new perspective, I would like to start with the notion of 'input' (Krashen, 1982) and its importance in L2 acquisition. Input to language acquisition can be considered as gas to a car (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). That is, as a car cannot move without gas, language acquisition cannot take place without input. One of the teacher's fundamental roles in a communicative classroom is to make the input comprehensible and meaningful to the students (Krashen, 1985; Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

In my teaching experience, I have taught both elementary and high school students. Of course, the nature of the input I presented to those groups differed noticeably. With elementary students, I always endeavored to make the input more comprehensible through using short utterances, a lot of repetition, slow rate of speech, and clear content that revolves around here and now (VanPatten, 2017), whereas with upper grade students, the need to use these techniques decreases. Along with appropriate level input, no matter their age, students of all ages need to be engaged actively while being exposed to the input simply because "students do not sit in the class like little sponges" (VanPatten, 2017, p. 62). Thus, for instance, when introducing food vocabulary

to my first-grade students, it is not enough to display the name of a food using visuals and asking them to repeat it; instead, I need to engage them more with the content by asking them about what food they and their classmates like and what they don't, responding to their comments and thus ensuring their active engagement and attention to the input presented. Simply put, when exposing learners to the input, I need to talk with them, not at them (VanPatten, 2017). This is also a matter of concentration and motivation; I have noticed that my students cannot maintain focus on the input if they are not actively involved.

Whereas comprehensible input constitutes the basis of the communicative classroom, it is useless and meaningless without communication. Swain (1985), in her output hypothesis, claims that it is not the input per se that can lead to second language acquisition, but rather it is the input that is integrated in communication in which learners are engaged in negotiation of meaning. Along with this, Hall (2010) states, "what students take away from their classroom in terms of target language knowledge and skills is ultimately tied to the kinds of interactional practices that teachers create in their talk with students" (p. 213). Thus, I cannot expect my students will engage in communication outside of the classroom or even in the classroom if they are restricted to controlled-speaking drills where the goal is simply to practice certain grammatical structures or lexical items.

VanPatten (2017) defines **communication** in the classroom as "expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning with a purpose in a given context" (p. 13). That is, in a communicative classroom, students are engaged in tasks and activities in which they can express their thoughts, ideas and beliefs, interpret and analyze the introduced

input, and negotiate the input they receive. Along with VanPatten's definition, the Can-Do Statements of the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2017) are organized around three essential modes of communication, namely 1) interpretive, 2) interpersonal, and 3) presentational communication. All three modes need to receive adequate attention in the foreign language curriculum for students to develop proficiency.

Ultimately, a teacher who advocates the communicative approach acts as an architect, who designs and plans communicative tasks and activities, whereas the actual construction and building responsibility is held by learners (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). In this respect, "students become more comfortable with listening to their peers in group or pair work, rather than relying on the teacher for a model" (Richards, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, in my teaching, I plan to be a facilitator and a guide in a learner-centered classroom. Instead of offering my EFL students all the knowledge they need, making them passive learners, I want to engage them in activities, such as: 1) guessing the meaning of words, 2) interpreting and analyzing information they read or hear, 3) expressing their personal opinions and beliefs about different topics, 4) negotiating meaning with me and their peers, and 5) correcting themselves and providing feedback to others.

Engaging my students in such communicative activities entails encouraging them to participate and advising and guiding them on how to perform the tasks to meet their communicative goals. Thus, my students will act as active stakeholders who are not only at the center of all classroom activities, but also accountable for their learning and proficiency development as they seek help from their teacher and peers.

Moreover, I envision my teaching to place the meaningful context at the forefront of communicative activities that take place in my EFL classroom. According to Shrum and Glisan (2016) the term **context** refers to "the setting, topic, situation, purpose, actor, roles, cultural assumptions, goals, and motivation that are involved in communication" (p. 44). For instance, I can recall an example of one of my lessons that helped me realize how establishing a meaningful context promotes communication. Instead of surrounding third grade learners with pictures of animals around the classroom, I took them to a nearby zoo where they could actually see these animals in real life, learn their names in English, and interact with the zookeeper by seeking answers to their questions. For homework, students wrote a short description of the animal they most liked.

Offering students a communicative goal and meaningful purpose is another crucial role of the teacher. Communication between two people typically has a social or a cognitive-informational purpose because in real life "we don't use the language for the sake of using language" (VanPatten, 2017, p. 10). Therefore, engaging my students in a task where they ask one another questions about their daily routine lacks a communicative purpose because the real purpose is not to communicate but rather to practice vocabulary words or language structure. On the contrary, asking students to interact in order to exchange their phone numbers, plan a trip for the class, decide on a movie to watch at the weekend, or even make a recipe in the class are all tasks with clear communicative and meaningful purposes students can encounter in real life.

Thus, I envision my EFL classes to be learner-centered so that my students can purposefully express their thoughts and ideas freely, interpret the comprehensible input introduced, and negotiate meaning in the types of contexts that are relevant to them.

Grammar Through a Meaning-Based Approach

During my study in the MSLT program, my ideas toward grammar instruction have changed. Two years ago, while reflecting on my teaching, I asked myself repeatedly the exact reason behind my students' failure to master grammatical rules after many lessons of explicit explanation and practice through fill-in-the-blank drills or through composing isolated sentences. I used to believe that grammatical structures can somehow be "transferred into the students' head" and "belong" to them (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p. 7). I also used to think that the more time I dedicated to teaching these grammatical structures, the more accurate my students would be.

Unfortunately, at that time, I did not recognize that committing errors is natural and indispensable in the L2 learning process, neither did I recognize that all L2 learners go through stages in the same order (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro &Mandell, 2001; VanPatten, 2017). Becoming knowledgeable about the nature of the language learning process has led me to acknowledge the fact pointed out by VanPatten (2017) that L2 acquisition is "slow, piecemeal, and stage-like" and instruction cannot alter the order of acquiring linguistic features, nor can students skip the stages they must go through during their L2 acquisition (p. 40). Therefore, it comes as no surprise to observe my EFL students learning the irregular verb "ate" and then after a week, I find them using "eated" to eventually return to the correct form after some time. Understanding the learning stages my EFL students go through made me come to the strong realization that complete accuracy is unattainable in the classroom (Ballman, Gasparro & Mandell, 2001). Thus, I need more patience and tolerance with my students' grammatical errors in my future

teaching. They will get better with more practice in realistic scenarios, not with repeated grammar lessons.

Embracing the fact that grammatical errors are a natural part of L2 learning, however, does not make me step back from teaching grammar. Instead, I still believe that teaching grammar is essential especially for the upper-grade level students because it develops their interlanguage as well as improves their fluency and confidence in using the language (Batstone & Ellis, 2009; Reck & Kim, 2014). VanPatten (2017) emphasizes that it is not about whether to teach grammar but how to teach it.

The ACTFL performance guidelines (2016) emphasize that explicit grammar teaching has little influence on learners' language acquisition. Moreover, as ACTFL performance guidelines indicate, it is not a matter of what and how much language students need to master but more importantly about what they can do with the language in the three aforementioned modes of communication. "Grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences" (Savignon, 2017, pp. 4-5).

Initially, I need to decide on which grammar to teach. In other words, what grammatical structures do my students need in order to complete the communicative task? (Shrum & Glisan, 2016). More importantly, I want to posit grammatical structures in highly contextualized situations (Batstone & Ellis, 2009; Shrum & Glisan, 2016). Such contexts can include listening to an audio recording of a real conversation between fluent speakers, listening to the teacher talking about one of her experiences, listening to or reading an interesting story, reading a relevant text, and so forth. Undoubtedly,

organizing grammar into these relevant contexts can help students become fully engaged in meaning before drawing their attention to the connection between form and meaning.

One model of teaching grammar that inspired me and that I am eager to implement in my future EFL class is the story-based language teaching (PACE model) which was developed by Donato and Adair-Hauck. This model combines both consciousness-raising knowledge and production of language. According to Donato and Adair-Hauck (2016), this approach consists of four phases:

1. Presentation: Students are exposed orally to an interesting story, authentic listening, a sports document, or an experiment. Through this stage, students are engaged actively through KWL strategy, repeating words, and anticipating activities.
2. Attention: Students' attention is drawn to the target language through highlighting the form and asking them questions.
3. Co-construction: Teacher and students cooperate to co-construct the grammatical explanation.
4. Extension: Students are collaboratively engaged in tasks where they use the language creatively. Such tasks include information gap activity, role play, authentic writing activity, and paired interview.

Incorporating the PACE model in my classroom means engaging my students in "cognitively challenging activities," where they construct meaning from the context (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p. 222). This creative model can also give my EFL students more opportunity to think, analyze, discover, and hypothesize the rules along with abundant space to interact with their teachers and their classmates. Through guided

participation, students gradually work out the rule with the teacher's support using well connected, relevant, and contextualized discourse.

In the end, grammatical structures can be considered as "road signs" only having meaning when they are integrated within a context, with people, and in "connected discourse" (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p. 208). Applying these ideas in my EFL classroom means not using grammar as a starting point to drive my teaching practices but rather as a facilitative tool that can contribute to effective communication.

Positive Learning Environment

Like many other L2/FL learners, I sometimes experienced language anxiety during my school and college years when I was unable to effectively contribute in my EFL classes. According to MacIntyre (1998), foreign language anxiety includes the "worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). According to Burden (2004), "when learners view the classroom as anxiety inducing, they often feel as if they are swimming among sharks and become less socially oriented, less assertive and more withdrawn or self-conscious than in other situations" (p. 17). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) attribute language anxiety in the foreign language classroom to certain factors such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. While it is very common to observe my students feeling anxious and frustrated, especially when it comes to oral communication, I do believe that it is the teacher's role to minimize the stress and anxiety that occur in the L2 classroom. Krashen (1982), in the affective filter hypothesis, proposes that language acquisition can only take place when the affective filter is low. That is, learners should be exposed to a low-stress, comfortable, and relaxed learning environment. Hargreaves (1994) also underscores that:

> Good teaching is charged with positive emotion. It is not just a matter of one's subject, being efficient, having correct competencies, or learning all the right techniques. Good teachers are not just well-oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy. (p. 835)

Knowing this underlines that my role includes both teaching the language and building a strong rapport with students.

One essential factor that can contribute to creating a positive learning environment is establishing a good student-teacher relationship. Shernoff (2013) states that when learners come to believe that their teachers do not care about them, "it is human nature" that they will not care either (p. 151). That is to say, when teachers show concern, sympathy, and interest to their students, the students, in turn, will care more about their learning and will actively engage in the classroom.

My learning experience has led me to see how essential it is to establish a good and supportive relationship with my students. When I was a student at school, I experienced those teachers who cared a lot about their individual students and were always keen to create a very warm and supportive environment in the classroom. On the other hand, I was also taught by some teachers who placed intellectual or affective barriers between them and their students and restricted their primary roles to transmitting knowledge to their students. These combined experiences made me determined to build good relationships with my students; relationships that can contribute to a motivating and supportive learning environment in the classroom.

Praising students' performance in the class and providing them with positive feedback regularly is also an essential factor that can contribute to create a motivating learning environment (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Hierck, 2016). Second language classrooms can be a source of anxiety for many students especially for those with low proficiency level. Speaking on a personal level, I have seen the great influence of positive feedback on my students. That is, once I praise my low-level proficiency students with motivational expressions, I can guarantee, on that day, that they will strive to do the best they can in the class. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013), students experience "high efficacy" when they receive positive feedback or when they are told, by the teacher, that they are capable of accomplishing success (p. 127).

Collaboration and teamwork can also stimulate a positive learning environment in the classroom. Through collaborative work, students will break their apprehension of committing mistakes in front of their peers and they will take more risk in their learning. Likewise, collaborative tasks can develop "a sense of community" where students, and particularly the low-achieving ones, do not perceive the classroom as a competitive environment (Ansari, 2015, p. 43). Indeed, competition can make students fearful of committing mistakes and losing face in front of their peers (Lin, 2015). In my own teaching experience, when working collaboratively, my students do not only produce more language, but also feel more secure and appear more engaged compared to completing tasks individually. Once all students are engaged collaboratively, teachers can make sure that all resources are optimally used "to ensure the optimal learning well-being of everyone" (hooks, 2010, p. 22).

Through establishing good relationship with my students, adopting positive reinforcement and fostering collaborative learning, I will help my future students feel more secure and valued, which can lead to greater progress in their L2 proficiency.

Conclusion

In short, my new teaching perspectives are rooted in making my EFL classroom communicative, teaching grammar in a meaningful way, and creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. Supporting and advocating a communicative language teaching approach implies providing my students with bountiful opportunities to produce, interact, and negotiate meaning, through which they can achieve the primary goal of learning English as a foreign language in Oman. I will endeavor to have all my classroom tasks and activities revolve around communication and simultaneously lead to communicative goals and meaningful purposes. This might require adaptation of some of the tasks and activities in the ready-made syllabus used at Omani schools.

As there is still an essential need to teach grammar, I want to teach grammatical structures in a more contextualized, connected, and meaningful discourse where my students play the primary role in co-constructing and working out the rules through questioning, analyzing, and hypothesizing. In the end, I believe grammar should be used as a supportive tool to achieve a broader goal, which is learning a second language to communicate effectively.

Finally, the conducive learning environment is one of the essential factors that contribute to students' success in L2 classrooms. The responsibility to cover the content of the ready-made syllabus in the classroom should not inhibit me from setting aside enough time to create a friendly and welcoming classroom environment with mutual

respect between teacher and students (hooks, 2010), collaboration, and positive reinforcement.

Throughout my study in the MSLT program, I have observed multiple Dual Language Immersion (DLI) classes; some are in English, and the others are in Spanish. These observations provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own as well as others' teaching practices. Each time I observed a class, I was seeing techniques and strategies that either align with perspectives I have gained from my study or contradict them. In either situation, I gained insights into what constitutes effective teaching. Throughout my observations, I have monitored the role of both teachers and students and the kind of collaborative learning that can enhance a welcoming learning environment. These aspects reflect some of the perspectives integrated into my teaching philosophy.

The Role of the Teacher

The primary role of the teacher in the classroom is to expose learners to comprehensible input. The majority of teachers I have observed endeavored to make the input comprehensible in several ways, such as using visuals, videos, body language, gestures, examples, and many other techniques. For instance, in the twelfth grade-Spanish class, the teacher explained the pre-production, production, and post-production stages of making films using several videos that illustrate each step as well as incorporating visuals to help her students digest the complex input. I have seen that when dealing with complex ideas, showing videos when feasible, can greatly assist in making the input more accessible and comprehensible as students can get more details via a combination of both sounds and images.

While using videos worked well with higher-level classes, I saw the first-grade teacher utilizing a variety of strategies to make the input more comprehensible. She used

certain gestures and visuals to help students distinguish between nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and students were mimicking her gestures with great interest and engagement. In the same class, to explain the concepts of “main ideas” and “details,” she used hand gestures showing “big” to refer to main ideas and “small” to refer to details and then used visuals to give examples. She engaged her students while explaining the two terms by asking them to think of more cases and help to sort the words and pictures. Here, it came to my mind what VanPatten reminds us, “Students do not sit in the class like little sponges. The teacher talks with students, not at them. Students are engaged from the beginning” (p. 62). I have seen in action that it was not only making the input comprehensible that mattered but also engaging students with the input to keep them more focused and highly interested as well.

Another role of the teacher apparent in some classes I have observed is creating a meaningful context for different tasks in the classroom. In a fifth-grade English class, to introduce a lesson on writing a bibliography, the teacher asked her students to think of a recipe they wish to make, and they had to follow specific instructions to have a delicious and tasty meal. She compared writing a bibliography with making a recipe. I have seen that creating a meaningful context, even if it is an imaginary one or an analogy, helped maintain students’ attention and interest during the whole task.

Related to creating a meaningful context, the teacher in the third-grade Spanish class established a meaningful purpose when it came to practicing writing skills. She asked her students to think of a public hero they most admire, about whom they wish to know more. She asked them to search for the information they need by accessing the internet and to start writing about them as a part of a project they are going to present to

the class later on. I have observed that students were highly motivated and interested in searching for and writing about their favorite persons. To gain a better result in creating a meaningful purpose for the task, I would have created an audience for my students' writers and presenters. For example, I would have informed them that their written compositions would be displayed on the school's bulletin board or published in the school's blog, where they would have a broader audience. For their presentations, I would have told them to think of a person they would like to invite for their presentations. Creating a meaningful purpose for their learning can make them more engaged, and thus they strive to achieve their best.

Modeling tasks before asking students to complete them can contribute a lot to their understanding of what is expected from them. This particular role of teacher was clearly emphasized in lower-grade classes I have observed. For example, the first-grade English class teacher demonstrated the writing task through writing a short sentence about herself, asking them to write their sentences, modeling elaborating the written sentence, and then asking them to do the same, respectively. This gradual modeling of each step made me think if L1 English students need that demonstration and guidance, my elementary EFL learners need more of that careful modeling and patience.

In several classes, I have observed that teachers acted as facilitators, the role emphasized extensively in the communicative language teaching approach. The best example that showed the facilitative role of the teacher was in eighth-grade English class, where the teacher initially reviewed the rules of writing a vignette by discussing with students their features and the steps students should go through. This step served as a scaffold to prepare them for more independent work. After previewing and structuring

the task, and while students were engaged in writing their vignette, the teacher walked around the groups providing support to students with vocabulary words, ideas, and grammar details. The facilitative role of the teacher necessitates highlighting the role of students, and assisting students in keeping on task, in the classes I have observed.

The Role of Students

The last two examples I have included above demonstrate a student-centered learning environment where learners are responsible for their learning. That said, students in the third-grade Spanish class engaged in searching for information and writing their compositions about their chosen heroes. Likewise, eighth-grade English class students strived to create their personal vignette books. In both cases, students held the accountability to choose their own topics to write about, integrate their selected pictures, edit and revise their work, and then present their projects to the whole class.

Such autonomous learning also occurred with the young learners in the first-grade class. They actively chose their favorite non-fictional books from the class library and then started searching for and writing or drawing their main ideas and details. Initially, I assumed that this activity would lead to a mess. Fortunately, my premise was wrong as I observed students were well-organized with the explicit instruction given by the teacher. More importantly, they were highly motivated to choose their books and proud of their final product. I used to fear adopting this kind of activity as I thought it would lead to losing control over the class. However, observing students acting as adult learners through gaining more autonomy to pursue their learning has encouraged me to design activities where my EFL elementary students can hold the responsibility in their learning even if it might lead to a mess in my initial attempts.

In their role of learners, the fifth-grade English students took the floor when it came to talk about one of the stories they have read recently. In two minutes, each group member had to speak about the components of the story or novel (i.e., the characters, the setting, the plot, the theme, points of view, and so forth). Then they needed to answer questions raised by their peers. Each student took the opportunity to be a leader of the discussion. Seeing how spontaneous students were when discussing their stories made me embrace the idea that I need to trust my students' abilities more and always make them at the center of their learning.

Welcoming Environment Through Collaborative Learning

I do believe that through collaborative learning, learners can make the most gains. The mediation students offer to and receive from their peers while engaged in collaborative tasks can allow for increased communication, enhanced input, deep understanding, and increased self-confidence as they work in a safe environment.

Most of the teachers I have observed frequently adopted collaborative learning to complete various tasks in their classes. In a Spanish eighth grade class, before and after watching a video about one of the Spanish cities, the teacher asked his students to work collaboratively to complete KWL chart (i.e., K: What they already know about the topic, W: What they want to learn, L: What they learned). Although I don't understand Spanish, it was clear that students were interacting, attentively listening to each other, commenting on each other's contributions, and asking different questions. However, to gain the best benefits from collaboration, I would have given each member a role to focus on during their discussion. By doing so, I can ensure that everyone would have equally contributed to their group work.

Another collaborative activity adopted by the same teacher in the same class was asking students to compose a short paragraph about a displayed picture of an old architectural building in Spain. Students collaboratively wrote the description before they came to the board and wrote their group's final product. Collaboratively completing the task provided students and particularly the low-achieving ones with more self-confidence to go to the board and share others' writings.

In another elementary English class, I noticed that often collaborative learning was absent. In a warm-up activity and while students were watching an educational video about oceans, the speaker in the video paused a question, "what makes oceans salty?", few students gave their oral interpretations individually as teacher was leading a whole-class discussion. In this type of tasks, students need more time to analyze and find an answer. Thus, I do believe that group discussions would have worked more effectively as each group could have come up with a list of possible answers after sharing opinions with each other.

I can conclude that observing various teachers working with different age groups of students has offered me an opportunity to reflect on specific teaching practices. It has allowed me to embrace several effective teaching strategies and techniques that are compatible with the perspectives embodied in my teaching philosophy. Through class observations, I have envisioned how I want to act in my EFL classroom as well as how I want to see my students behaving. I have also perceived how collaborative learning can contribute to empowering my students' learning and increasing their engagement and motivation as well.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

LANGUAGE PAPER

English as a Lingua Franca in the Omani Educational Context:

Myths and Pedagogical Implications

INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

In my second semester, I wrote the following paper for LING6940 (Independent Readings). After a short discussion with Dr. DeJonge-Kannan about teaching English as a lingua franca, I was fascinated to further explore this topic in further depth and relate it to my educational context in Oman.

Researching this topic helped me to shape new thoughts about what it means to teach English in the era of world Englishes. More importantly, it helped me reconsider some of the existing myths in the Omani educational context such as the belief in the superiority of native English speaker teachers, the sole reliance on one established English variety (e.g., standard British English in the case of Omani public schools), and the excessive focus on grammar and receptive skills at the expense of communicative skills development. Reviewing the research literature on English as a Lingua Franca helped me to present some pedagogical implications for each myth so as to enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching (ELT) and learning in Oman.

As it is a new topic to me, I believe this paper would also be beneficial to my colleagues in Oman to raise their awareness of what it entails to teach English in the world of globalization where the English language no longer belongs only to native-English countries.

Abstract

With the rapid growth of bilingual English speakers around the world, much research has been conducted on the need to teach English as a lingua franca. Oman is one of the expanding circle countries that have witnessed an increasing number of bilingual speakers of English. This paper starts by providing a brief overview of the Omani education system of English language teaching and learning. It then examines some of the myths in English language teaching (ELT) and learning in Oman including: (1) the persistent belief in the superiority of native English speaker teachers despite the increasing number of bilingual English teachers in Oman; (2) the exclusive reliance on the British Standard for the English curriculum; and (3) the overwhelming emphasis on correcting form and grammar at the expense of developing communicative competence. These myths are addressed with reference to the research and studies conducted on English as International language and English as a lingua Franca. The paper also explores and suggests some practical and pedagogical implications with reference to the previous studies, so as to assist Omani English learners to become more competent as well as to enable them to effectively communicate with World English speakers.

Key Words: World Englishes (WEs), English as a lingua franca (ELF), English as an international language (EIL), native English speaker teachers, bilingual speakers of English, Omani education system, Omani curriculum.

Introduction

English has spread dramatically around the world as an international and global language. The globalization of English language is due to it being widely spoken as a second language and extensively used in many regions around the world (Mckay & Brown, 2016). Learning English is considered a significant priority by hundreds of millions of people around the world. Nowadays, it is generally acknowledged that there are more bilingual English speakers than monolingual English speakers. According to the British Council, the latest research shows that there are about 750 million English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers and approximately 375 million English as a second language (ESL) speakers, and it is predicted that the number of English language learners will exceed 1.9 billion by 2020 (Cohaesus, 2014).

Oman is one of the developing countries that have recognized the significance of learning English as an international language and as a lingua franca. During the reign of Sultan Qaboos in the 1970s, the government designated English as the only official foreign language in the country, allocating budget and resources to support English education in Omani schools (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). English is currently used in both governmental and private institutions but is more common in NGOs such as UNESCO and UNICEF, as well as oil and gas companies (Al-Jardani, 2014). It is also used in business, media, education and health care. Thus, the multilingual setting of the Omani workplace imposes the need for English as a means of communication.

This paper, after briefly summarizing the important definitions in English as a lingua franca and Kachru's model of the three circles, provides an overview of English education in Oman. It then addresses some of the myths surrounding English language

teaching and learning in Oman from the perspective of English as an international language (EIL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF), and finally describes some pedagogical implications for more effective English teaching and learning in Oman.

ELF and Kachru's Model of the Three Circles

As the number of English speakers has rapidly increased, the concept of World Englishes has emerged, as different varieties of English have arisen where the language "has come in contact with other language" (Saraceni, 2015, p. 79). English as a lingua franca (ELF) refers to English when it is used as means of communication among speakers who don't share the first language and cultural background (Saraceni, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011). On the other hand, English as a foreign language (EFL) refers to English language when it is learnt to communicate with native speaker communities (Jenkins, 2015). English as an international language (EIL) is a broader term that is concerned with issues related to educational, cultural and economic aspects of language whereas ELF does not deal with such issues (McKay & Brown, 2016).

In the field of ELF, it is essential to address Kachru's model of the three circles. Following Saraceni (2015) and Sharifian (2009), the circles can be described as follows:

- The inner circle refers to regions where English is the primary language as in UK, US, Australia, and Canada. In this circle English is used in all types of activities.
- The outer circle refers to regions where English arrived through colonization and it is the co-official language. Examples include India, Malaysia and Singapore, where English is commonly used by higher social classes and educated people.
- The expanding circle refers to regions where learning and using English is not a result of colonization and this circle covers countries such as Germany, Brazil and

China, Japan and Korea. Here, English is used as a means of communication among speakers not sharing the first language or the cultural background.

Kachru's model of the three circles emphasizes the fact that "English plays different roles and exists in different forms for different people in different places" (Saraceni, 2015, p. 51).

English Education in Oman: A Brief Overview

In the 1970s, the government of Oman operated three schools educating about 900 students, all of them boys (Al Issa & Al Bulushi, 2012). This number has since increased rapidly to reach thousands of schools, both public and private, with hundreds of thousands of students today. English has been taught at public schools since 1970 and in higher education institutions since 1986 (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukuva, 2014). In 1998, a new program for English language teaching was implemented in all schools in Oman (Al Issa & Al Bulushi, 2012). This system is referred to as "Basic Education," in which students start learning English as a compulsory subject from the first grade. Students have 5 to 7 English periods of about 45 minutes each per week. Students are taught by bilingual speakers of English, Omani and non-Omani. The latter tend to come from Tunisia, Egypt, India, and other countries. Omani English teachers by far outnumber non-Omani English teachers.

Myths and Misconceptions

With the goal of producing competitive and effective English learners, the Omani government has given English language teaching and learning much of its concern and interest. Nevertheless, the education system, including teachers and curriculum, clings to myths that contradict the use of ELF. In the following, I will address three main myths

namely: the perception of superiority of native-speaker teachers of English, the exclusive reliance on the British standard at schools, and the strong emphasis on form and grammar over communicative skills.

Myth 1: Native English Speaker Teachers Are Better Than Bilingual English Teachers

McKay & Brown (2016) recommend avoiding the use of the term non-native for the English speakers and replacing it with bilingual speakers of English. Similarly, according to Saraceni (2015), the prefix 'non' adds negativity when defining speakers of English by what they are not. Therefore, I prefer to use, in this paper, the term 'bilingual speakers of English' rather than 'non-native English speakers.'

As the number of bilingual English users increases in Oman, Omani English teachers are getting more opportunities for jobs in schools, colleges, and universities. Omani English teachers now teach at almost every school around Oman and they significantly outnumber bilingual English teachers from other nationalities. That is the outcome of the Omanization policy (replacing the expatriate with the trained and skilled Omani labor) that has been promoted since 1988. Thus, in most schools, English is taught by Omani English teachers, while in higher education, there is a blend of teachers from the three circles - the inner, the outer and the expanding circles. The number of Omani English teachers in the higher education institutions is increasing gradually.

Despite the intensive efforts made by the government to employ Omani English teachers in schools, it has been my experience that native English speaker teachers (NESTs) are still considered as perfect models of the English language and regarded as better than bilingual users of English. Omani English teachers themselves regard NESTs

as much better in everything; fluency, accuracy and teaching capabilities. Unfortunately, hundreds of millions of non-native English speakers worldwide hold the assumption that British and American speakers are the rightful judge for their distortions and deviations of the English norm (Saraceni, 2015).

It is frustrating to hear many English teachers repeating the statement “I am still an English learner” whenever they make a linguistic mistake or admit not knowing something. Unfortunately, that statement is often made even by teachers who have been teaching for more than ten years. Thus, As Llurda (2009) confirms, “if non-native speakers of a language are regarded as permanent learners, they are denied any voice in their determining their use of the language and they are naturally often invited to imitate NS models, which become the ultimate target of the learning process” (p. 129).

Although several theoretical discussions have acknowledged the value of bilingual English teachers, unfortunately advertisements on TESOL websites still prefer employing American and British English teachers in countries like Japan, Korea, and other countries where English is appreciated for its economic potential (Mckay, 2012). Mckay suggests that there is a need for a “promotion for counter-discourse that recognizes and legitimizes the value of proficient and qualified bilingual teachers, no matter what their first language may be” (p. 42).

The growing body of research on ELF casts light on the strengths and weaknesses of both native English users and bilingual speakers of English as well as students’ attitudes towards each of them. Saraceni (2015) remarks that the preference for the NESTs remains without regard for how qualified they are for teaching and how effective they are when communicating with people outside of their country. Arva and Medgyes

(2000) and Moussu (2002) show that NESTs differ from bilingual English teachers in their English proficiency, teaching practices and their attitudes toward English teaching. That is, NESTs tend to be considered perfect exemplars in pronunciation and language use whereas bilingual English teachers are more skilled at explaining grammar rules and communicating with students (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). NESTs are considered more qualified in using authentic materials (Wong, 2009) but they are less competent in teaching grammar rules (Sung, 2014). On the other hand, bilingual English teachers are more efficient at explaining grammar rules (Aslan & Thompson, 2015).

Teachers' capabilities can also be perceived from students' attitudes toward NESTs and bilingual English teachers. Benke and Medgyes's (2015) study reveals that students prefer NESTs over bilingual speakers' teachers in terms of their level of education. Students also consider bilingual English teachers more traditional in their teaching than NESTs who are perceived as more talkative and outgoing. Brown (2013) also sets certain potential strengths of bilingual teachers of English such as:

- being familiar with students' language and culture
- using L1 for efficient explanation
- serving as a model for students
- implementing methods and materials according to local appropriateness.

Furthermore, Canagarajah (2013) demonstrates that, "Multilinguals have the capacity to decode the changing norms in different contexts, shape their language to accommodate the norms of their interlocutors and achieve intelligibility" (p. 8). Accordingly, NESTs and bilingual English teachers should both be regarded as valuable, with one additional advantage for bilingual English teachers being their multilingual

experience (Llurda, 2005). Likewise, Phillipson (2005) confirms that bilingual users of English should be celebrated with their "multiple linguistic competence" (p. 14).

With these strengths of bilingual English teachers described above, Omani English teachers should be proud of themselves for being bilingual, which is a defining feature that many NESTs miss.

Pedagogical implications. Mckay (2012) confirms that the "label that divides people as native and non-native is a poor theoretical construct for expanding the understanding of what it means today to be a competent teacher of English" (p. 42). Therefore, Farrell (2015) suggests that instead of focusing on the discrepancies between NESTs and NNESTs, it is more significant to pay attention to what contributes to effective and qualified teachers. He confirms that "all teachers have different strengths and weaknesses and must keep up with their professional development throughout their careers in order to remain effective in the classroom" (p. 83).

Nemtchinova's (2005) study explored perceptions of host teachers toward non-native English speaker teachers' trainees based on their classroom teaching practices. The findings showed that despite their abilities to establish good relationships with students, bilingual English teachers lack self-confidence and that was obvious in their tough self-evaluation. Llurda (2005) attributed the absence of self-confidence to their unsatisfactory level of language proficiency and the environment of ESL settings, as they regard it as more demanding compared with EFL setting.

Llurda (2009) and Kamhi-Stein (2014) offer suggestions to enhance bilingual English teacher's self-confidence:

- Teachers' language skills must be developed, and teachers sufficiently exposed to the target language. I think that there should be more focus on developing communication skills. Specifically, undergraduate students should go through intensive and sufficient courses during their four years of study and preparation to be teachers as they are acquiring the language in their country.
- Teachers must learn how to teach EIL. Workshops should be offered so teachers can learn effective approaches in teaching EIL. In the Omani context, I think continuous workshops should be conducted in each governorate where teachers can address current topics concerning effective strategies in ELT.
- Teachers should be given the opportunity to reflect on their strengths as second language teachers. I believe such reflection will help them realize they are well-qualified and simultaneously they can do better in the future.
- Bilingual English teachers need to believe that their accents do not necessarily mean they lack intelligibility.

By implementing the above recommendations, Omani teachers can gain more confidence that can make them feel more powerful in front of the native English speakers and in front of their students. As Llurda (2009) states that "… EIL as the target paradigm can really empower non-native English speaker teachers and set them in the right context for conducting their teaching task without having first to prove their competence, and so discard all possible doubts and criticism by students, program, administrators and fellow teachers" (p. 122).

Myth 2: Linguistic Features of L2 English Are Evaluated in Light of the Standard British Variety.

As mentioned earlier, the English language no longer belongs solely to native English speakers but rather to all its users around the world. This implies that when English is introduced to students from the outer or the expanding circle, it should be presented with its different varieties. Matsuda (2012) indicates that the focus of ELT textbooks, unfortunately, remains predominantly on materials that represent the British or American Standards and there little to no attempt to include other varieties, despite the number of non-native speakers continually increasing

In Oman, the ministry of education produces its own English language curriculum instead of buying ready-made textbooks from the inner-circle countries' publishing houses. Analyzing Omani English textbooks at schools, it is clear that Omani culture is well integrated in almost all the units of the textbooks from grade one to grade twelve. This characteristic makes the English language extremely relevant to the students' identity and their interest. However, the linguistic features of the English language including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are confined to only the British standard. Students are not introduced to other varieties of English. All the audio materials follow the British standard. That is, students rarely listen to people speaking other varieties. Teachers are always encouraged to use videos and audios that reflect native English standard. This policy contradicts with the reality for students in Oman, who have few chances to communicate with native English speakers, yet their chances to use the language are more with those bilingual speakers of English. McKay and Brown

(2016) affirm, “Learners have more opportunity to speak and use the language with L2 speakers than with L1 speakers” (p. 6). Omani students are commonly expected to communicate in English with bilingual speakers of English, such as tourists on the street or people at hospitals, colleges, hotels, and restaurants. Hence, students might encounter difficulty communicating effectively with those people if they have never been introduced to varieties other than Standard British English.

EIL scholars reject the notion that there is only one Standard English; they legitimize all English varieties (Li, 2017). In their view, English is a pluricentric language, which means it is a combination of standard varieties with the local ones (Li, 2017). Saraceni (2015) asserts that English language features of grammar, vocabulary and phonology can no longer be restricted to those belonging to inner-circle standards but are also those of other varieties of language referred to as “nativized English” (p. 172).

Pedagogical implications. According to Matsuda (2012), in the expanding circle countries, it is more “reasonable” to use one of the established varieties of English, yet, such a selection “should not disregard the need for students to be aware, appreciative and somewhat prepared for the encounter with other varieties” (p. 23). Matsuda (2017) confirms that the exclusive reliance on the dominant English standards (the American and the British) “does not sufficiently prepare our students for future use of English in which they are likely to encounter interlocutors and English varieties from countries other than these two” (pp. xiii-xiv). Therefore, students in Omani school should be exposed to different varieties of English and not only to the British Standard. This can be achieved through the collaboration of the Ministry of Education, teacher educators, teachers, and curriculum designers.

The Ministry of Education in Oman should design courses that can raise teachers' awareness about World Englishes (WEs) and the significance of incorporating different varieties of English in the classroom. Teachers also need to take practical courses where they can learn to use input and activities to assist learners to notice the differences between the local varieties of English and Standard English (Li, 2017). Curriculum designers should search for materials reflecting intelligible varieties of World English to integrate in the Omani English syllabus. Mahboob (2014) found that ELF-aware training helps the participant teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices. It helped them to reconsider some convictions related to their self-awareness as "non-native speakers" and their use of different instructional strategies (p. 12).

Omani English teachers should work collaboratively to share successful activities that can raise students' awareness about local varieties and how they are different from the Standard English. It might take a long time, or it might be deemed too expensive to replace the existing textbooks with the WE-oriented textbooks. Nevertheless, teachers can design activities where students can be exposed to different varieties in different social contexts (Lopriore & Vettorel, 2015) through videos, audios, documentaries or films (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). Teachers might face the challenge of time constraints to do such extra work, but it will be worthwhile to see our students, if not able to speak English like a native-speaker, at least capable of communicating effectively with other speakers of local varieties. Matsuda (2003) suggests that teachers can bring speakers of different varieties to the classroom to interact with the students. If face to face interaction is difficult this can be done through video calls. Teachers can also use materials from websites in different Englishes or show movies featuring World English speakers.

Myth 3: Teaching English Means Focusing on Grammar, Vocabulary and Receptive Skills

Unfortunately, a large number of Omani students finish school, after 12 years of studying English, unable to engage in very short oral exchanges even though the primary goal of teaching English as a second language in Oman is developing their communication skills. This failure to produce competent communicators results from the insufficient focus of the curriculum on communicative skills as well as the few hours allocated to teach English Language at Omani schools. I have seen that the curriculum gives much focus to reading comprehension as well as teaching grammar and vocabulary whereas the productive skills are marginalized. Since students have few chances to communicate in English outside of the classroom, I believe school time should be full of opportunities to practice and use the language.

In addition, students are not exposed to enough communicative situations where they can negotiate meaning, co-construct understanding, argue or ask for clarification. Because they lack these strategies, they are able to engage in conversation neither inside the classroom, unless it is rehearsed, nor outside of the classroom. Each semester, students are assessed on a short presentation and a rehearsed conversation. Unfortunately, such activities do not assist them to communicate effectively outside of the classroom in various settings and contexts.

Pedagogical implications. To enable learners to communicate with WE speakers, greater emphasis should be placed on building communication skills and communicative strategies rather than merely focusing on form and grammar. Students must learn to accommodate their own linguistic resources and negotiate meaning according to the

situation, purpose and the communication partners' linguistic repertoires so as to communicate effectively with other speakers (Canagarajah, 2007; Mahboob & Dutcher, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2004).

Omani students at school need more practice with communication skills so they can be more effective when communicating with others outside of the school setting. In this respect, Lopriore and Vetorell (2015) have suggested some activities that can assist learners to initiate and maintain communication when interacting with non-native speakers:

- Through noticing activities, students can be exposed to strategies used by characters in video clips, compare them with their L1 strategies, and then engage in real and practical communicative tasks in which they use the learned strategies.
- Exposing students to different social contexts in which L2 speakers effectively use the language in communication
- Inviting bilingual speakers to come to school and encouraging students to engage in computer-mediated communication

Along with the above suggested activities, the Omani curriculum should be evaluated in terms of including adequate and efficient communicative strategies. Additionally, Omani students should be exposed to a curriculum that focuses on acquiring communicative strategies that can develop their communication skills not only with native speakers but also with WE speakers. That is confirmed by Canagarajah (2014), as he points out that our interactions with others is "unpredictable" as we communicate with different speakers of different languages with different values and language proficiencies (p. 770). Therefore, in the context of a world of Englishes,

proficiency is defined as “developing awareness of variation in global Englishes alongside the ability to use English appropriately across contexts and genres and gaining the pragmatic skills to negotiate across Englishes” (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018, p. 79).

In fact, “ the need to for EFL learners to improve their English skills so they can accomplish real-world tasks cannot be ignored and this need must be met through the work of EFL teachers” because students do not only “need English proficiency after they graduate, they will also need it during the time they are still students” (Spicer-Escalante & DeJonge-Kannan, p. 2439). Therefore, teachers should also take training courses about how to plan, design, present and reflect on effective communicative activities (Lopriore & Vettorel, 2015). Because of limited exposure to English in schools, teachers should make use of all the opportunities to involve students in meaningful communication as well as to assign communicative tasks that can enhance students’ use of the language outside the classroom.

Regarding the assessment of students’ oral production, there should more emphasis on how effective they are in their communication as well as their use of different communicative strategies rather than focusing only on their accuracy. Moreover, teachers should be more accurate when assessing students’ oral production, taking into account the criteria set for speaking tasks. Importantly, students should be given the opportunity to reflect on their oral production so as to promote their strengths and overcome their weaknesses in the future.

Conclusion

Undeniably, the Omani government makes a lot of effort to develop the English curriculum as well as to incorporate the Omani culture in the curriculum. However, in this age of globalization where English does not belong merely to the native speakers, it is necessary to move beyond the monolingual approach where we rely on one standard variety. There is a need to create a pedagogical approach that takes into consideration the ELF research findings along with the Omani cultural context so as to allow more space for diversity in our curriculum and our teaching practice. In addition, further research needs to be conducted on how to incorporate different varieties in the classroom. As Matsuda (2003) states "… incorporating World Englishes is like putting on a new pair of glasses-the detail and the complexity of the world we suddenly see may initially be overwhelming, but in the long run, we would have a better view and understanding of EIL" (p. 727). Shifting to a pluricentric approach in ELT in Oman is not an easy task, yet with collaboration of all parties, fruitful outcomes will be gained in the long run so we can observe the new generations, from an early age, able to communicate effectively with speakers of different local varieties of English.

LITERACY PAPER

Enhancing L2 Learning through Literature Circles

INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

I developed this paper for LING6800 with Dr. Sarah Gordon. In this course, we were introduced to the value of integrating literature in L2 classrooms. Additionally, we were exposed to the theory and practice of various literature teaching approaches and strategies.

When I was teaching EFL in Oman, I regularly encouraged my elementary and high school students to stop at the school library, borrow books, and read them at home. Additionally, as a part of the assessment, students were required to read independently and answer question from a pre-determined list. Despite this focus on independent reading, there was no endeavor to engage students in discussions about the books they had read, nor were motivating strategies deployed to foster students' love for or even interest in reading literature.

My continuous quest for finding ways to motivate my EFL students and maximize their learning opportunities in the EFL classrooms pushed me to search for the most beneficial strategies to introduce literature to my EFL students. Among the various strategies, my interest was particularly piqued by literature circle activities. Exploring the research on literature circles, I learned how this instructional practice is effectively implemented in language classrooms. I have also identified the many benefits my EFL students can attain, which range from creating a lifelong love for reading, developing different literacy skills, building up cultural knowledge, fostering collaboration and communication skills, to creating a reduced-stress learning environment.

Abstract

This paper introduces literature circles as a robust instructional approach for teaching literature to L2 learners, focusing on their historical background, their essential elements, and the framework for their implementation framework. It also draws on empirical studies and teacher experiences, confirming its potential and effectiveness in language classrooms. More specifically, it sheds light on the potential benefits L2 learners can gain from participation in literature circles. This paper suggests that, along with the joy of lifelong reading, literature circles in L2 classrooms, and particularly ESL/EFL classrooms, are conducive to meaningful learning opportunities through developing various literacy skills, enhancing cultural awareness, cultivating collaboration and communication skills, and establishing a friendly and supportive environment.

Keywords: literature circles, L2 learners, literature, reading, literacy skills, communication skills, collaboration,

Introduction

Literature can serve as an effective means for EFL learners to engage with language and culture in the classroom. When using the term literature, I mean "written texts which have a certain aesthetic value and some perceived status in the culture of which they are artifacts" (Edmondson, 1997, p. 45). EFL learners can gain multiple benefits when encountering literary texts in the EFL classrooms. First, literary texts are authentic texts, an important merit in communicative language teaching (Picken, 2007). According to Yadav (2014) this authenticity exposes learners to and helps them practice the actual use of language in real life situations. Second, the themes and story lines in literature can enhance learners' motivation, which is an essential factor for language acquisition (Picken, 2007). Learners tend to enjoy relating the themes and topics of literature to their personal life and experiences (Duff & Maley, 2007). Third, literature can promote effective interaction due to the multiple meanings embodied in literary texts (Collier & Slater, 1987; Picken, 2007). That is, the reading of a literary text engenders rich classroom discussions where learners can share opinions, ideas, feelings and interpretations. Fourth, a literary text is a valuable source of cultural enrichment, as language and culture are inseparable (Collier & Slater, 1987; Picken, 2007). Through literature, learners can understand norms, traditions, habits, and values of the target language as well, while they can compare their own culture with the target one, thereby by addressing one of the ACTFL recommendations for cultural comparisons. Lastly, literature, with its many genres, forms, structures, and styles, can contribute to developing different language skills (i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking).

With all the benefits mentioned above, best practices in incorporating literature in the L2 classroom entail careful planning and proper implementation of strategies to gain the best learning outcomes. Several approaches and methodologies have emerged to highly engage learners while reading fiction and non-fiction texts, a major one among them being literature circles. Daniels (2002) defines literature circles as "small, peer-led discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (p. 2). According to Daniels, having students merely read texts and answer recall questions is no longer appealing in effective education. Instead, teachers now, "ask students to engage text at higher levels of thinking: drawing inferences, forming hypotheses, making judgments, and supporting conclusions about what they read" (Daniels, 2002, p. 5). Thus, Daniels and others suggest including more critical thinking and interpretive activities when working with literature in the L2.

In my own teaching experience, I have come across numerous EFL elementary and high school students who display either lack of interest or helplessness toward various texts because they lack the proficiency to comprehend what they are reading. Furthermore, they approach literature through a traditional method where they read texts in solitude and then complete some comprehension questions. Literature circles can offer support to my EFL students, providing a promising opportunity to increase their motivation, develop their literacy skills, and more importantly, to instill the passion for reading in them to become a lifelong reader. Literature circles share with the communicative language approach some tenets of creating "genuine learning opportunities" (Shelton-Strong, 2012, p. 221). One shared goal, according to Richard (2006), is engaging learners in meaningful interaction where they hold accountability for their own learning (cited in Shelton-Strong, 2012).

Literature circles are the practical application of a mix of theoretical approaches, which is why Daniels (1994) asserts that: "Literature circles bring together powerful, research-based theories of education" (p. 13).

In what follows, I will first address the nature of the literature circle: its definition, its historical background, and its basic elements. I will then highlight the role of both teachers and students in literature circles. Finally, I will discuss the potential benefits of literature circles in cultivating second language learners' proficiency level with relation to enhancing collaborative learning, fostering autonomy and community, gaining exposure to culture, and developing various literacy skills.

Literature Circles: Definition and Historical Background

The idea of literature circles, or book club activities, was first launched in the US in the1980s (Daniels, 2002). Anecdotally, the literature circle is attributed to being first originated by Karen Smith, an elementary school teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. She observed the profound engagement of her fifth-grade students in reading and discussing the books found in a forgotten box in her classroom (Aguerre, 2006). Once the term literature circles were coined and related activities were tested in the classroom, Harvey Daniels was the next well-known figure associated with this instructional approach. He published his first book on literature circles in 1994, with a revised edition in 2002 (Marchiando, 2013). Marchiando states that Daniels' book became "a seminal text on the subject due to the breadth of his research and the extent of his discussion on classroom application" (p. 14). Since the introduction of literature circles, numerous teachers around the world have incorporated them in their classrooms and millions of students are involved actively in this unique instructional strategy (Daniels, 2002). Literature circle

activities are even being adopted by some states in the US as a suggested method with the common core curriculum.

In literature circles, each group is comprised of four or five students (Daniels, 2006; Karatay, 2017). According to Daniels (2002), while reading the assigned portion of text, each member takes notes, so they can contribute and share ideas in the upcoming discussion. When they finish their reading discussions, the circle members may share some insights of what they read with a wider group, and then move into a new cycle. The ultimate goal of literature circles is "to allow students to practice and develop the skills and strategies of good readers" (DaLie, 2001, p. 85). While there are many variations of the group activities, roles, and tasks, the main characteristics -- reading a literary text as a group and having a shared experience that involves interpretation, critical thinking, and communication -- remain constant.

Key Ingredients of Literature Circles

Successful literature circles typically include the following essential components:

1. Students choose their own reading materials.
2. Small temporary groups are formed based on book choice.
3. Different groups read different books.
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule time to discuss their reading.
5. Students use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
6. Discussion topics come from students.
7. Discussion meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.

8. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or an instructor.
9. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
10. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
11. When books are finished, readers share with their classmates and the new groups form around new reading choices. (Daniels, 2002, p. 18)

Since the initiation of Daniels' model for literature circles, adaptations have been proposed to suit different learning contexts and different course subjects. For example, Furr (2004) adapted Daniels' model to better suit the EFL context by making it the teacher's responsibility to determine the choice of reading materials, group formation, and follow-up activities after students finish their books. Furr insists that EFL instructors should be responsible for choosing reading materials that are not only level-appropriate, but also "appropriate as a basis for discussion," as well effective in promoting "reading fluency" (p. 5). However, Shelton-Strong (2012) argues that giving students the chance to practice autonomy in choosing the books or shorter texts, along with some guidance from the teacher, may increase their motivation to read.

Based on my own pedagogical experiences, I do believe that giving students the chance to select the reading materials with some guidance is very encouraging and motivating to them as they commonly tend to choose books of topics matching their interest. This coincides with what we all do as readers in our lives. Day, Spiegel and McLellan (2002) remind us that "as adults, we got book recommendations all the time, but we read only books that appeal to us" (p. 24). Again, in my teaching experience with elementary students, I have seen that when it comes to book choices, students do not look at how difficult the book is but rather spontaneously grab the book that matches their

interests and preferences. They are not concerned with proficiency level, though sometimes I have made graded readers available. One strategy I used to employ is that when I find the book too hard for them, I try to help them find a similar book on the same topic that is level-appropriate, or an abridged version. Aligning with this point, Marchiando (2013) suggests that prior to the activity or book choice, the teacher can provide students with book talks to give their students a brief description of each book, so students can rank their preferences. Or teachers can ask students to look through each book for two minutes before ranking their preferences (Marchinado, 2013). In addition, I think that other types of pre-activities, such as the commonly used activity of "book tastings," may provide EFL students the occasion to "taste" or discover books about many different topics, in many different genres or styles and to make a choice that is both level-appropriate and motivating.

Additionally, Furr (2004) suggests that, in EFL contexts, heterogeneous groups need to read the same text, instead of sharing and exchanging various reading materials. A further change recommended for the EFL context is that in the final stage of literature circles, students present their reading group's project to the whole class, and/or the instructor provides additional information to fill in the gap, if any, in students' understanding.

In the end, it is the teacher's decision on how to implement literature circles depending on the learning contexts and students' needs. Thus, I can assume that literature circles in my EFL elementary classroom will differ substantially from those conducted in middle or high school EFL classrooms. In the former, I expect literature circles to be more

simplified, as students will not be able to generate the same length or level of rich discussions, whereas in the latter, they will be more elaborated and productive.

Students' Roles in Literature Circles

As mentioned above, teachers have designed and adopted a range of student roles within the circles to fit various learning contexts and diverse learners, including different age groups, different proficiency levels, and different needs. Assigning a variety of roles to students enables them to understand that there is another purpose for reading than merely a form of escapist entertainment, which in turn helps them focus on different facets of reading such as content, style, and themes (Rogers & Leochko, 2002, p. 6).

Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive list of the examples available from researchers and teachers, I will focus here on some of the original student roles played in the circles proposed by Daniels (2002) and Daniels & Steineke (2004), which are:

- Connectors find connections between the text and their personal lives or the world.
- Questioners write down questions they think of while reading the texts. These questions can be about characters, events, vocabulary or even predictions.
- Literary luminaries pick quotes or sections from the text they want to share with their group.
- Illustrators draw a picture from a specific scene in the text to help them visualize that part of the story.

Furthermore, Daniels (2002) suggests additional roles teachers can assign depending on the number of students in each group. These expanded roles include:

- Summarizers prepare a brief summary of the reading, including the main points or events of the assigned text.
- Researchers look for the background information to share on a topic related to the text such as culture of the characters or the history of the setting.
- Word wizards pick out puzzling and unfamiliar words from the text and look up the definitions to share.
- Scene setters keep track of where different events in the book are taking place and note when the action switches locations.

According to Daniels (2002), student roles are designed to assist teachers in implementing literature circles in their classrooms. The photocopied role sheets given to the students also serve as a guide to help them get used to the key roles (Lenters, 2014). They help them to read and discuss better as they have clear purposes for their reading (Daniels, 2002). To achieve the best gains from group discussions, Daniels insists on the temporary use of role sheets, as extensive reliance on the role sheet may lead to a repetitive and mechanical discussions, which in turn can decrease students' motivation and interaction. Therefore, Daniels and Steineke (2004) recommend that students keep their role sheets face-down during their discussion and to glance at their notes only to recall the information and not to read directly from their papers. In my EFL context, I think the use of these role sheets should be periodically extended compared to those implemented in the L1 classroom. That is because that L2 readers need more time to get accustomed to the assigned roles and need more guidance. These role sheets can "provide an important source of effective scaffolding for learners" (Shelton-Strong, 2012, p. 217).

Teacher's Roles in Literature Circles

One of the flaws of reading programs in many traditional classrooms is that teachers hold control over almost everything from the texts to read, to the tasks to perform, to the assignments to select (Daniels, 2002). However, literature circles are more student-centered as they are peer-led discussions. According to Brabham and Villaume (2000), in literature circles, it is "the students' insights and inquiries, not the teacher's list of questions, that drive the instruction" (p. 278). This necessitates teachers to act as facilitators who observe and keep monitoring students in their group discussions. However, in order to maximize the gains from literature circles, teachers need to dedicate enough time to setting up the rules of literature circles in their classroom, as well as modelling and demonstrating the procedures (Daniels, 2002, 2006; Furr, 2004).

Nevertheless, a good beginning is not sufficient. According to Daniels (2006),

> Peer-led reading groups need much more than a good launching; they require constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, and disagreeing agreeably, dealing with "slackers," and more. (p. 13)

Bernadowski and Morgano (2011) recommend that teachers choose a book or a short story to model and familiarize students with the proper implementation of literature circles with their expectations or requirements for the essential roles. Daniels (2002) summarizes the structures of literature circles training in five primary stages: (p. 12)

- Explain: describe the procedures and the purpose of literature circles.
- Demonstrate: model literature circles using a short story or show them a videotaped example.

- Practice: let students try literature circles with different varieties.
- Debrief: help students to decide on the best approach.
- Refine: apply ongoing mini lessons for further training on literature circles.

EFL students can benefit most from the communicative experience of literature circles when they are carefully prepared from the beginning. I also believe that ongoing reflection on literature circles by both the teacher and students can contribute to the sustainment of this instructional approach with consistent power and effect.

Along with training students on literature circles' structure and expectations, teachers need to train their students in developing their critical thinking skills. To achieve that, Sanacore (2013) suggests that teachers should train their students with open-ended questions that help them connect to their personal experiences. According to Sanacore, this type of questions encourages greater contributions from the students since they do not have a single answer as well; moreover, it serves as "inclusive scaffolds for transitioning the reflective process of thinking deeply and critically about a text's meaning" (p. 119). Thus, instead of forming questions that test their ability to recall information, they need to form questions that foster elaboration and clarification, connect to their personal lives, and simultaneously encourage them to refer to evidence in their reading texts. Examples of these questions (adapted from Sanacore, 2012) are as follows:

- What would I do if I were the main character?
- What obstacles would I have encountered while solving the problem?
- Would I have been successful in dealing with the problem? Why?

It is true that while students are engaged in literature circles, teachers step back to monitor and facilitate group discussions, yet the teacher's role is crucial in establishing a

proper understanding of the approach and setting the rules to be followed by the students in order to reap the best rewards from engaging students through literature circles.

Why Literature Circles in EFL Classrooms

I have experienced teaching different age groups of EFL students -- elementary, middle and high school students -- and I have frequently seen the sparkling eyes of my students when it comes to announcing, “it is story time” or “it is independent reading time”. However, many students typically ended up not fully engaged with the literary texts they were reading. I believe they lacked the proficiency to complete the reading by themselves. What has been missing from traditional reading instruction in the EFL classroom, according to Marchiando (2013), is “any chance for students to engage with one another about the books they are reading and to have control over their own literacy learning” (p. 13). That has definitely been true in my context because most of the time, reading tasks are performed independently and only rarely in collaboration with others to explore the deep meaning of texts beforehand.

I do believe that literature circles show promise in transforming my EFL reading classes from something they love yet find intimidating to something they love and simultaneously enjoy. According to Shelton-Strong (2012), implementing literature circles “within the greater ELT context appears to be not only feasible but also largely compatible with established practice and within what is widely considered to be a pedagogically appropriate approach to stimulate language acquisition” (p. 222).

Before addressing further the benefits of literature circles that my EFL students can gain, it is worthwhile to review recent research on implementing literature circles in

both EFL and ESL contexts. A wealth of research has established the potential of literature circles, whether in L1 or L2 contexts.

Su and Wu (2016) examined the impact of literature circle on ten Taiwanese EFL college students in relation to their literary and literacy learning. They found that literature circles enabled the participants to act as mature readers practicing different jobs such as choosing a book, distributing roles, planning a reading and meeting schedule, keeping reading records, and maintaining collaborative discussions. The researchers reported that literature circles also fostered collaboration and a community-like context for learning. That is, they assisted students to freely interact, share feelings, opinions, and experiences with their peers effectively.

In a more recent study, Azmi (2018) investigated the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing active learning among ESL university students. The data collected reveals that literature circles offer students an opportunity to vigorously take part in their learning through commenting, arguing, sharing, and justifying their opinions and ideas. Through literature circles, students developed several soft skills and strategies of good readers such as communications skills, management skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The researcher also reported that literature circles were effective enough to break the silence of many shy students in the classroom.

In a different context, Wazed Kabir and Muhiudin (2018) examined the potential of literature circles in developing English language proficiency of 22 school- teachers at BRAC Nobodhara in Bangladesh. The participants had master's degrees in different disciplines, yet their English language proficiency was limited. The qualitative data obtained through observations and post-group discussions revealed that literature circles

provided a positive and safe environment, especially with the different roles such as discussion director, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, literary luminary, and illustrator. The participants reported that literature circles assisted them to develop a kind of accountability and ownership toward other members. The researchers also observed that literature circles served as an opportunity for practice in both writing and oral activities which can contribute to language development.

The findings of the aforementioned studies investigating the efficacy of literatures circles are all consistent. They underscore the potential of literature circles as a collaborative learning activity in providing an effective learning environment where EFL or ESL learners can cultivate important aspects of learning such as Fostering communication and collaborative learning, enhancing autonomy and motivation, , establishing a safe and responsible community, gaining exposure to culture, and developing overall literacy skills.

In the following, I will address each benefit in detail, referring to my EFL context.

Fostering Communication and Collaboration

Literature circles are by nature collaborative and social. This explains how the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), proposed by Vygotsky, can be achieved when using literature circles in EFL classrooms (Maher, 2014). Students assist each other to better understand the literary text while engaged in group discussions. Each member of the group acts as a scaffold for their peers, which enables all to build on each other's knowledge. This setup builds community and fosters a communicative environment.

Coccia (2015), a second-grade teacher, consider literature circles effective for engaging his students in constructive communication when he states, “If talking to their

peers is what makes school enjoyable for students, then why not offer them opportunities to be involved in conversation around the topic of literature" (p. 3). Similarly, DaLie (2001), a high school teacher, contends that literature circles have enabled his students to experience the pure collaboration where they respectfully share ideas and perspectives and benefit from each other's unique insights. If L1 teachers consider literature circles beneficial for fostering more communication in their classrooms, I would undoubtedly consider them useful for engendering rich and purposeful communication in my EFL classrooms. Students can learn the language effectively when they are offered a variety of opportunities to engage in real communication (Krashen, 1981; VanPatten, 2017). According to Daniels and Steineke (2004), in literature circles, "the conversation is free-flowing, spontaneous, back-and-forth, and natural" (p. 5). Literature circles allow learners to be involved meaningfully in real communication as they discuss themes important to them (Elhess & Egbert, 2015), enabling. students to "communicate as readers" (Rogers & Leochko, 2002, p. 5). As they participate in literature circles, students ask questions, negotiate meaning, interpret, and analyze information in the literary texts (which, although outside the scope of the present paper, align very well with the strategies and activities prescribed by current pedagogical research in the multiliteracies approach to language learning, espoused by Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy (2015) and others.

Enhancing Autonomy and Motivation

For my EFL students, I always look for activities that increase their confidence, lower their affective filter, and develop their learning autonomy. I see literature circles as a suitable approach to accomplish this goal. That is because literature circles are initially student-led discussions through which students can develop their ownership by choosing

what interests them most (Hisatsune, 2012), with some guidance from the teacher if necessary. Additionally, students practice ownership in literature circles through deciding how much of the text they will be reading and what kind of discussion they will hold in their group meetings (Daniel, 2002, cited in Marchiando, 2013). Literature circles are therefore truly student centered.

As students are actively engaged in various decisions about their learning, they become more motivated and interested, and their learning will be more meaningful. Sanacore states, “students are more likely to become involved with literature when their selections and personal responses are respected” (Sanacore, 2013, p. 118). Furthermore, Furr (2004) considers literature circles highly effective and transformative, or what he refers to as “magic,” as he noticed his Japanese students changed from being passive recipients to becoming more motivated and interested, to actively participating in discussion groups, sharing stories, and referring to certain passages to support their arguments in English (p. 1). As students’ motivation to read more and engage in literature circles increases, teachers will get used to the positive outcome indicated by the repeated question by their motivated students, “What are we reading next?” (Bernadowski & Morgano, 2011, p. 29).

Establishing a Safe and Responsible Community

EFL learners might experience language anxiety if they believe they lack the proficiency to communicate efficiently or interact with the reading materials, as the whole body of research on anxiety and affective filter has demonstrated. Literature circle activities have the potential to create a positive learning environment as students work most of the time with their peers. Building a learning community is an important part of this

methodology. This is in part because, when students help each other in group discussions, they build “a sense of belonging” (Batchelor, 2012, p. 27). At least anecdotally, I have observed that my EFL students feel more secure when discussing and collaborating with their peers than when being directly asked and assessed by me. Literature circles are highly beneficial for those students who lack confidence because the small group setting offers them a non-threatening environment to share their thoughts and experiences (Rogers & Leochko, 2002). According to Rogers and Leochko, the sense of community can be more “tangible” in the long-term reading goals (p. 6). As students get involved in several literature circles, they become accustomed to the roles and activities, and enjoy the shared moments as they read, discuss, and work with their peers.

Additionally, literature circles can promote a sense of responsibility in students, as they are accountable for working with each other to make various decisions (Lin, 2004). According to Daniels (2006), in literature circles we assign students different “jobs” that parallel the same process undertaken by adult readers in a real-world book club, such as selecting a book, gathering members, designating reading schedules and regular meeting times, grounding group rules, writing down responses as they read, maintaining productive discussions, evaluating their performance, and keeping track of their progress. They also feel accountable for the whole group, as they are required to read their assigned materials carefully to discuss and share their ideas with peers. Thus, most students are motivated to do their best while reading the text in this group setting, because they feel that they do not want to let their peers down “by coming unprepared to contribute” (Marchiando, 2013, p. 17). Engaging students in a highly secure and responsible community via literature circles can maximize the learning opportunities for my EFL students. Each student will act as a

peer-tutor who is responsible to share their insights and opinions first to their group and then to the whole class.

Gaining Exposure to Culture

Literature is a key resource that can enable students to open themselves to understanding different cultures and societies. Through literature, students not only develop their understanding of the background of the novel or the story, but also gain knowledge about the history and the politics of the country described in the literary work, which means appreciating different ideologies, mentalities, feelings, and expressions of that culture (Violetta-Irene, 2015). Literature circles provide the opportunity for students to gain and develop cultural awareness through setting a role like culture connector who is accountable for recording any special, different or unique cultural aspect in the story (Maher, 2015) and then hold a short discussion to inform and exchange ideas with the other members.

Moecharam and Kartikasari (2014) report on their experiences using literature circles in their advanced EFL classroom. They found that their students developed a positive experience with literature circles where they could gain knowledge about different values and cultures. Students reported that being exposed to different stereotypes in the story assisted them to “recognize and embrace differences” (p. 124). Additionally, students asserted that through literature circles they could develop cultural awareness about “sensitive issues and personal beliefs” as well as about their “cultural bias” (p. 125). Having my EFL students explore the cultural aspects in different literary works via literature circles means preparing them to develop intercultural competence where they can better understand and interact with people from different parts of the

world. Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) define intercultural competence as "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (p. 7). Through literature circles, and particularly by focusing on the cultural role within that approach, students can develop understanding that learning a language is not constrained to the ability to read, write or speak in that language but understand its culture as well.

Developing Reading Comprehension Skills

In most EFL classrooms, traditional reading lessons follow the same path where students read the text independently, answer comprehension questions raised by the teacher and then engage in composing a piece of writing independently. It is typically a rather solitary affair, preventing students from grasping the full meaning of the literary text. Neither do they develop essential strategies required to fully interact with what they are reading or with each other. According to Day, Spiegel, McLellan, and Brown, (2002), asking students to read a piece of literary text and answer questions about it means we are not teaching them to comprehend the text; we are verifying whether they comprehend. On the other hand, through literature circles, learners' comprehension broadens and deepens as they share ideas, questions, and understanding with their peers (Day et al., 2002). Reading circles also enhance interaction with the text, build relationship among students, and help them to develop reading strategies.

Under the traditional approach, when students are all reading alone, they also interact with the text through their emotions, inquiries, and mental visuals; they also make predictions, judge characters, and evaluate the reading materials (Daniels &

Steinke, 2004). However, as Daniels and Steinke (2004) point out, they "may lack strategies for capturing those responses before they evaporate" (p. 72). Literature circles develop various comprehension skills that are necessary when reading literary texts. When participating in literature circles, students use different strategies with their assigned roles such as connecting the text to their personal lives, questioning, visualizing, analyzing and inferring; all of which are keys to solid comprehension and successful interaction with the literary text (Daniels, 2002). Discussions during literature circles are beneficial for both strong readers and less proficient ones. Strong readers benefit from the manipulation of reading strategies to easily articulate their ideas to their peers whereas struggling readers can see comprehension modeled by their peers and are thus able to practice it (Day et al., 2002).

Students may also practice reading strategies such as reading for the gist, reading for context, etc. Once implemented meticulously, literature circles can also develop students' critical thinking skills (Maher, 2015; Sanacore, 2013). Through some assigned roles (such as the connector, the culture collector, the researchers, and many others possible roles) learners need to analyze and interpret information, infer meaning, and relate information to their personal experiences and to the outside world as well.

One might wonder whether restricting students with role sheets may limit them to a particular cognitive skill. However, Marchiando (2013) underlines that these various roles "give students a purpose with which to approach the reading," and research has demonstrated the effectiveness of reading with a purpose in assisting students to understand and remember the text easily (p. 15).

Developing Listening Skills

Engaging in literature circles provides opportunities for EFL learners to develop their listening skills. During the literature circles, students have to listen to each other carefully because their contributions and understanding are built on what others have said. Students also must listen to the feedback they gain from their peers, through which they can "strengthen, clarify, or rethink their ideas" (Marchiando, 2013, p. 18). As they attentively listen to each other, they can develop respect for others' views and opinions (Ketch, 2005). When literature circles are facilitated effectively, students have the opportunity to work on all of the skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as critical thinking.

Conclusion

In summary, literature circles have been met with appreciation in numerous L1 and L2 classrooms over decades of research, development, and practice. Implementing literature circles in an English language teaching context "appears to be not only feasible but also compatible with established practice and within what is widely considered to be a pedagogically appropriate approach to stimulate language acquisition" (Shelton-Strong, 2012, p. 222). In addition, literature circles address many different skills.

I view this instructional approach as a valuable aid to enhance my EFL students' proficiency. This premise I am making stems from the potential of literature circles in allowing "the learning of language within a more realistic atmosphere through discussion and reading for pleasure in groups" (Bedel, 2016, p. 96). My EFL students can play an active role in their learning process by choosing the books that appeal to them, leading group discussions, and holding the responsibility for their own and others' learning.

Literature circles provide a conducive learning environment, even an enjoyable or pleasant classroom environment, where learners can cultivate various literacy skills by asking questions, interpreting, analyzing, connecting texts to their own personal lives, communicating, and reflecting on their own and others' performance. Put simply, they can develop multiple literacy skills along with a lifelong love for reading. It seems to me a call for further research that specifically targets school learners (i.e., elementary and middle school students) is needed as most of the empirical research conducted on literature circles in EFL classrooms seems to focus on university students.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

During my study in the MSLT program, I have conceptualized my future EFL classroom as grounded on meaningful communication, an approach I believe creates maximally effective learning opportunities for my EFL students. Advocating for a communicative classroom means gaining sufficient knowledge about the kind and the nature of activities and tasks that can contribute to optimal conditions for language learning. The first chapter of **Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell (2001)** provides a useful overview of how task-based activities promote group cohesiveness and collaboration. Another helpful image that shaped my approach is VanPatten's description of tasks as "the backbone of the communicative curriculum" (p. 77). VanPatten clearly distinguishes between tasks, exercises, and activities. Whereas tasks involve expression and interpretation of meaning and they have communicative goals, exercises fall short on these three aspects. Activities, at their best, intend to express and interpret meaning, yet they only aim to "explicitly practice language" (p. 84). Inspired by these two texts, I focus this annotated bibliography on task-based language teaching (hereafter TBLT), in which I review various sources to explore TBLT-related topics including: its historical background, its rationale and significance, its principles and features, some empirical studies that highlight its benefits and challenges, critical issues related to task design, and dispelling its associated misconceptions.

Offering a brief historical background of TBLT, Ellis (2018) states that the need to include tasks in language classrooms emerged during the development of the communicative language teaching approach in the 1970s and 1980s. However, as he points out, in its earlier development, although tasks were identified in both

communicative language teaching and the natural approach, they were not initially considered as units around which language courses could be developed. Ellis further explains that, in communicative language teaching, classroom tasks were primarily utilized to identify which language features were to be taught. Likewise, in the natural approach, where course content was organized around themes and situations, tasks were used mainly as "one type of activity for generating comprehensible input" (p. 8). As Ellis reminds us, it was not until the mid to late 1980s when early proposals of TBLT were published. These early proposals shed light on the rationale for TBLT and its design and evaluation.

Before addressing various aspects of TBLT, it is essential to define a classroom task in general, so one can distinguish "tasks" from other types of classroom activities. Ellis (2003) defines a pedagogical task as:

> a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes. (p. 16)

To further foster understanding of the above definition, **Ellis (2009)** simplifies the definition through positing certain criteria for a classroom activity to count as a task. First, it should primarily focus on meaning rather than form. Second, there should be a gap for learners to notice while attempting to express an opinion, convey a message, or infer meaning. Third, learners should rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to complete a task. And lastly, there should be a well-defined outcome for the assigned task other than a practice of a particular language feature. Ellis distinguishes between TBLT and task-supported language teaching. Whereas the former requires a syllabus with specified content based on students' needs analysis, the latter is more based on a linguistic syllabus where students practice pre-determined linguistic items. This study suggests that task-supported language teaching can simply be modeled in PPP (i.e., presentation, practice, production). Ellis' definition, along with the criteria developed, helps teachers understand how a task is substantially different from regular activities carried out in many traditional classrooms. In other words, for a classroom activity to be called 'a task', it should be oriented to a meaningful and communicative goal to be achieved by the end of task completion.

To expand my understanding of TBLT, I next selected **Bygate (2016)**, which explores the rationale behind TBLT. According to the researcher, learning a language is challenging and complex, as learners need to acquire a range of phonological, grammatical, and lexical knowledge as well as the pragmatic use of language. They further need the capability to use such knowledge both orally and in writing in real-life situations. Language "is not just a mental store" in which learners spend their whole academic life trying to absorb and comprehend the knowledge without any attempt to use

it in real contexts (p. 382). Hence, according to Bygate, effective teaching occurs when teachers observe their students carrying out different projects, such as cooking dishes, competing with each other through games, or conducting discussions, and then draw conclusions for future learning. Simultaneously, Bygate underscores that engaging learners in TBLT does not only help them perhaps think like native speakers but also involves them "dynamically with the language", although, as he confirms, that does not necessarily occur in all foreign language classrooms (p. 382). Therefore, with TBLT, language is not treated as bits and pieces to be absorbed by students whenever they are merely exposed to them. Rather, TBLT creates a real and engaging context through which students learn the language as a whole and in a way that is comparable to aspects of L1 acquisition.

Furthermore, Bygate indicates that TBLT helps learners better understand how aspects of language work, as they relate language to meaning and purpose, receive feedback from their peers, and thus increase proficiency and strengthen their grasp of the new knowledge. That means, as the author points out, that TBLT can be deemed "a reference point" where learners relate aspects of language to meaning while they are engaged in actions such as cooking a recipe or putting together a biography (p. 386).

Understanding the rationale for TBLT made me more inquisitive about its essential requirements and distinctive principles. **Long (2015)** contends that true TBLT entails a careful analysis of students' needs as well as the production of materials that are appropriate for the targeted learners. Giving further justification for needs analysis, the author states that teachers can identify students' current goals and communicative needs and thereby design the program accordingly. To me, that implies that, before designing

any task for my EFL students, I need to bear in mind the purposes for which my students need to use the language, so the task can replicate real-life situations and thus be more meaningful to them. In other words, in my own teaching, I need to make the task more relevant to their interests and their proficiency needs to maximize their motivation when performing the task.

In addition, Long introduces the main distinctive principles of TBLT. Learning by doing is one of its defining features, which requires that the task aims to meet students' present or future real-world communicative needs. Long suggests that, for example, students can follow live or recorded street directions from a native speaker by tracing out a road on a map. This task prepares learners to follow directions to find their way when they experience the real situation of being in an unfamiliar place. He further argues that this kind of task is more relevant, interesting, comprehensible, and memorable when compared with reading a text about somebody following directions. On a personal level, I do believe that engaging my EFL students in tasks where they are actively involved in the input can make the learning process more interesting and meaningful to them. For instance, instead of asking my students to just read a text about tourism in Oman and then involving them in a redundant comprehension activity, I can substitute that by asking each one to read about one different city in Oman. They can then produce a written brochure with images and text and then orally present it and convince others to visit that place. By doing so, students will not only grasp the reading text, but they will also produce, share, and convince others to visit their favorite places. This is just one example of a task in which learners can use the language for a real purpose.

According to Long, TBLT also features healthy teacher-student relationships. Building a connection with students is important. He claims that while learners are engaged in performing the task, students must be treated equally since they are all involved in the task. They have the freedom to negotiate for meaning with the teacher or their fellow students, which can establish good relationships in a reduced-stress atmosphere.

Another characteristic of TBLT is collaborative learning. TBLT is interactive and the approach boosts the principle of mutual aid and cooperation. According to Long, such cooperation is indisputably apparent in all the phases of the task performance. Students cooperate while doing the task, though, for example, preparing a report, answering questions related to a recording they heard or a text they read, doing consciousness raising activities for the form, and practicing the analyzed form of language. Long points out that one cultural problem teachers might face concerning the cooperation principle is that "students from some societies are raised to believe that life is a rat race and that competition, not cooperation, is the only way ahead" (p. 82). In my own teaching experience, I have noticed this situation several times where some high proficiency students were not that motivated to be engaged in a traditional cooperative task following the PPP model. They had adopted the mindset that working in a team means missing the opportunity to compete with others simply because their final product will be attributed to the contribution of the whole group. However, in TBLT, teachers should emphasize what Long has stated, that "helping their classmates means helping themselves" as they are involved in communicative and real-life tasks through which they will develop their fluency and accuracy (p. 8). Personally, I think it is worthwhile to talk with the students

about the value and the benefits they can gain from being engaged in cooperative tasks. Furthermore, it is possible to compete as a team, with group rather than individual competition.

Importantly, Long reminds readers that tasks must be learner-centered in a meaningful sense. While students are engaged in doing the task, they interact with their peers or with their teacher and negotiate meaning, which results in elaboration of input. Thus, the teacher is not the sole source of knowledge that students need to rely on, as TBLT encourages them to interact more with each other within the context of the task.

Alongside these principles addressed above, my attention was caught by another distinct feature, mentioned by **Rodriguez, Florez & Barreto (2014).** According to the researchers, in TBLT learners are more likely to be involved in problem-solving tasks where they analyze and evaluate the input and their performance as well. According to the authors, problem-solving tasks contribute to developing learners' critical thinking, motivating them to use L2 as well as solving problems outside the classroom. This implies, for instance, that asking my students to plan a trip to a place that follows certain criteria, or to suggest and justify solutions to different problems, or even to hold a constructive debate, can all contribute to the development of their critical thinking and the engagement in meaningful use of language.

Having grasped the basic features of TBLT made me more curious to explore how this approach can be implemented in language classrooms. I found **Willis's (1996)** framework quite appealing; as it is the most referenced one and provides detailed and well-structured phases. This framework is comprised of three essential phases: pre-task, task cycle, and focus on form. In the pre-task phase, students are introduced to the topic

or theme of the task, goals, and what is expected of both students and teachers. In the task cycle, students carry out the task in pairs or small groups. At some moments in this phase, students are exposed to comprehensible input, either by reading or listening to recordings, and in either case, they need to use their linguistic knowledge to process and comprehend the input. Students are also required to plan either a written or an oral report which they will present to the whole class. Additionally, students listen to recordings of fluent speakers doing the same task and they need to compare and reflect upon the way they did the task and their findings. In the focus-on-form phase, students' attention is drawn to a certain language feature through, for example, analysis activities (e.g., underline the verbs in the past form or indicate which expressions refer to the past time and which do not). In the practice phase, students are engaged in practice activities based on their previous language analysis (e.g., review of phrases identified, sentence completion, and matching activities).

Willis argues that students going through these phases encounter the conditions for second language acquisition which are: exposure to comprehensible and rich input, opportunity to use the language for real purposes, increased motivation, and focus on form. Once these conditions are apparent, TBLT can be beneficial and thus can promote language proficiency.

Related to the implementation structures of TBLT, I found many resources addressing task design as one critical issue in this approach. Recently, Ellis (2018) has discussed some issues in designing a task-based syllabus; among them are task types and task selection. According to Ellis, there is still no clear way of classifying tasks. Pedagogically, as Ellis points out, tasks can be classified into real-world and pedagogic

tasks. Real tasks are those found in real life and have “situational authenticity” (p. 13). According to Ellis, one example of this type of task is an information-gap role play of hotel receptionist and prospective guest, where the latter has to book a room using the information given by his partner. Pedagogical tasks may lack situational authenticity but still have interactional authenticity (i.e., the natural use of language found in real-world context). An example of pedagogical tasks is ‘spot the differences’ where learners can benefit from turn-taking and clarifying misunderstanding which is very common in everyday language. Ellis also classifies tasks into input-based versus output-based. Whereas the former focuses on allowing learners to process information and demonstrate understanding, like “drawing a picture or making a model”, the latter requires learners to produce an oral or written composition (p. 13). The third type of task is the distinction between focused and unfocused tasks. As the author indicates, unfocused tasks are more concerned with inferring general linguistic features, while conversely focused tasks orient learners to use specific language features.

Aside from the debate over correctly classifying task types, the distinction of different tasks described above can be a useful guide for me to determine which tasks are more suitable for my EFL classes, and even for different students—with different backgrounds, proficiency levels, and learning styles—in the same class. However, I would argue that these classified tasks may overlap with each other. That is, I can use real-life tasks, such as having students engage in planning for a real-life trip, and simultaneously design a map which is an output-based task.

Task selection is another critical issue in designing a task-based syllabus. As mentioned earlier, needs analysis is significant for selecting tasks suitable for groups of

learners. However, Ellis argues that needs analysis might be most beneficial for learners who need the language for daily use and work purposes. On the other hand, as he claims, need analysis might not be necessary for young foreign language learners who do not use the language often. What is more critical, as Ellis suggests, is selecting tasks based on themes relevant to learners' own lives such as about the students themselves, their homes, as well as their imagination. Ellis proposes that choosing themes should be grounded on students' proficiency level; themes closer to their lives can be more suitable for low proficiency students whereas themes apart from their lives can fit more advanced-level students. With this in mind, as my students make progress in their levels of language proficiency, the themes of tasks should escalate in difficulty. This conclusion leads me to assume that having a mixed-ability class means that, if not differentiating the themes between divergent groups, I need to bear in mind the complexity of tasks and make them suitable for different levels within the same class.

In the same vein of designing a task-based syllabus, **Van den Branden (2016)** discusses additional issues. One of those of interest to me, as it can have an impact on task-based learning, is individual learner differences. According to the author, although teachers play an active role in task performance, learners remain the most pivotal participants in TBLT. Therefore, the extent to which learners participate and engage in interaction and use their mental abilities to complete the tasks varies, which in turn determines how much learning takes place in performing the tasks. Van den Branden reminds us that, "teachers cannot do the language learning" neither can tasks "cause learning", as tasks are simply vehicles of "mental processing that can lead to learning" (p. 246). What is important in performing tasks is "learners' willingness" and their capability

to deal with task demands (p. 246). In this respect, I think that whereas teachers cannot regulate all the cognitive variables such as the learner's memory and brain capacity, they can contribute to increase learners' motivation and lower their affective filter through designing tasks that are appropriate to their language proficiency levels and at the same time relevant to their interests.

Following initial publications on TBLT, a variety of misconceptions emerged, causing researchers to defend and validate this instructional approach. Among those researchers, I found **Ellis (2014)** and **Long (2016)** the most illuminating resources on this complex and still-evolving pedagogical approach. Reading about the misconceptions in these two resources helped me gain better insights about the nature of TBLT and also strengthened my interest in implementing this approach in my future teaching.

Among the misconceptions is that TBLT is a vague and indefinable construct (Ellis, 2014). Ellis argues that he had defined a task with certain characteristics that distinguish it from an exercise. As discussed earlier, Ellis reminds us that these features include focusing mainly on meaning (i.e., message), having a gap, encouraging learners to use their own prior linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, and having a well-defined outcome. According to Ellis, whereas an exercise includes "a text-manipulation of some kind" such as filling in gaps and performing a scripted dialogue, a task focuses more on "text-creation" where learners use all their knowledge either to process the input or produce output (p. 28). Ellis (2014) demonstrates that task and an exercise have completely distinct goals; the former aims to achieve a communicative goal whereas the latter is more oriented to correct language use. Perhaps the various definitions that have emerged over time to describe tasks from different perspectives have clouded some

critics' views of TBLT. However, Ellis' definition is sufficient to serve as a guide for me when designing tasks for my EFL students.

Another critique addressed in Ellis (2014) is that TBLT is not appropriate for novice-level learners. This is derived, according to Ellis, from the hypothesis that a task includes speaking or writing and that novice-level learners cannot be expected to have acquired enough knowledge to be able to produce the language. Ellis argues that input-based tasks simulate L1 acquisition where children do not begin processing the language by speaking it, but rather they spend sufficient time listening and "matching what they hear to objects and actions around them" (p. 30). TBLT, as the author points out, can be an opportunity for novice-level learners to acquire the language naturally, similar to the ways in which they acquire their L1. More significantly, the author asserts that input-based tasks do not prevent risk-taking learners from speaking at the very beginning while listening if they can do that.

A third myth is that grammar is not taught in this approach. Ellis confirms that there is in fact adequate exposure to grammar, even if there is no grammatical syllabus. That is, teachers can design focused tasks that address specific grammatical features that learners need further support in. The author further clarifies that what is absent in TBLT is the explicit teaching of grammar. Ellis justifies that "grammar is best learned in flight where learners are struggling to communicate" and they attempt to find specific language forms that can help them to understand or express meaning (p. 31). Therefore, as mentioned earlier in the phases of task implementation, there is a focus-on-form phase where learner's attention is drawn to a particular feature of language based on their needs and later on, they are engaged in communicative practice of these features.

I am most concerned with the last potential critique, since it reflects the context in which I am teaching (i.e., the foreign language context): TBLT is not appropriate for the "acquisition-poor environment" (Swain, 2005, quoted in Ellis, 2014, p. 111). As Ellis explains, an acquisition-poor environment includes a foreign language context where learners are entirely reliant on the classroom for learning the target language. The researchers who made this assumption, as Ellis has pointed out, claim that learners need a more structural approach where they learn the grammar that they need to communicate effectively. However, Ellis justifies his argument that learners, at the very beginning, need little or no grammar but they need "formulaic expressions" and vocabulary to communicate with others (p. 34). Later, in advanced levels, learners do need grammar to communicate more complicated ideas. According to Ellis, the main problem is "prioritizing explicit knowledge and accuracy over implicit knowledge and fluency" (p. 34). Ellis emphasizes that if the goal of L2 learning is to interact and develop communicative competence, overreliance on a grammatical syllabus cannot achieve that. I entirely concur with Ellis's argument, as I have observed that it is useless to teach grammar explicitly to novice-level EFL learners if the purpose is to develop their communication skills. It is true that explicit teaching of grammar can yield, as I observed, mastery of discrete forms to complete a fill-in-the-blanks or a multiple-choice exercise, but it cannot help them engage in communication where they can use the isolated language features they have learned through meaningful interaction.

Along with the above dispelled myths, Long (2016) discusses some other misconceptions associated with TBLT. I will address two of them that differ from Ellis's list and that are at the same time of interest to me in my teaching. One of these myths is

that TBLT disregards the learning of vocabulary. According to Long, TBLT gives more concern to the learning of vocabulary and collocations that many commercial textbooks neglect. That is apparent when using task-based language "elaborated-input" which focuses on the "authentic models of the use of lexical items and collocations which are totally absent in commercial textbooks for the purpose of simplification (p. 18).

Another myth that tends to be associated with TBLT is that the teacher's role is "downgraded" (Long, 2016, p. 24). Long argues that teachers' role in TBLT is more demanding and more communicative than their roles in the PPP approach. According to the author, task-based language teachers provide corrections for unexpected errors made by learners while working on their tasks, whereas teachers following the PPP approach can easily predict students' answers before students even say or write them. According to Long, "The PPP teacher is relegated to the job of implementing lessons planned down to the last drill and exercise by an unseen textbook writer and assumed appropriate for all students in a group on the same predetermined day" (p. 25). Simply, TBLT "tailors input and feedback to individual learners" (p. 25). Thus, TBLT offers more personalized learning and the teacher can better reach out to different learning styles with individualized feedback.

Concerning the last misconception discussed above, as I was eager to expand on the teacher's role in TBLT, I found Van den Branden (2016) focusing on this topic extensively. According to the author, these roles include: teacher as a mediator, teacher as a change agent, and teacher as a researcher. Below I give offer just a brief overview of these useful teaching personae as they pertain to TBLT.

Concerning the first role, teacher as a mediator of language learning, Van den Branden states that all actions and decisions made by the teacher, in all the stages of task performance, can enhance students' learning. That is, as the researcher clarifies, before task engagement, teachers decide on the content, the main focus, and the timing of each activity. During the task phase, teachers inform students of the goal of the lesson and the benefits of the task in real life—perhaps providing purpose and motivation. Additionally, they hold organizational actions such as giving clear instructions, arranging class into pairs or groups, and arranging turn-taking during whole-class discussions. More importantly, Long emphasizes that teachers need to make decisions on the sequence of activities logically and coherently in a way that can help to expose learners to "challenges that remain doable" (p. 169). During the post-task stage, teachers can draw on the students' strategies used during task completion, summarize the main lessons, focus on certain language forms, or even assess students' performance with feedback.

A "change agent" is another role dedicated to task-based language teachers (p. 172). That is, according to Van den Branden, teachers can make various modifications while students work on tasks, such as modifying the complexity of the content to suit students' language proficiency, increasing the degree of explicit teaching when focusing on form, replacing students' group or pair work with whole class discussions, or deferring communicative tasks to the final stages of the lesson.

According to Van den Branden, task-based language teachers' roles are not confined to the classroom setting, they can also act as researchers. Van den Branden claims that unanswered questions about TBLT remain, such as whether this approach works effectively for both teachers and students in real classrooms, as well as whether it

enhances the language learning of the students involved. Van de Branden acknowledges limitations of the existing literature, claiming "the range of studies is limited in which students were enrolled in a task-based course or program and were followed over a longer period to establish the impact of the program on the students' language development" (p. 176). Accordingly, teachers can act as action researchers as they collect data, analyze data, and share their findings with their colleague teachers, applied linguists, or university researchers. As the author claims, by recording their lessons or their colleagues' lessons, they can extend the scope of authentic data obtained. Furthermore, engaging their students in the research by filling out surveys to evaluate the tasks performed means contributing meaningfully to the growing research on TBLT. Identifying the various essential roles task-based language teachers play makes me acknowledge that this approach requires careful planning and training, if possible, to gain the maximum learning benefits.

After obtaining a good understanding of TBLT approach from the sources cited above, I turned to an exploration of empirical studies—by EFL teachers in their roles as researchers—that highlight both its effectiveness and constraints. Because this is not intended as an exhaustive literature review, I summarize below a selection of four relevant studies of TBLT in EFL classrooms around the world.

Thanh and Huan (2012) investigated the effectiveness of TBT on vocabulary acquisition in a study that consisted of 70 freshmen enrolled in a non-English major at a college in Vietnam. They obtained quantitative data from questionnaires to see students' attitudes toward TBLT and from a vocabulary test, while the qualitative data was obtained through interviews with the participants. The researchers applied the traditional

method of teaching vocabulary with the control group and TBLT with the experimental group. The findings showed that experimental groups were more motivated to learn vocabulary through the TBLT and that was attributed to the type of tasks implemented. That is, they were designed to be meaningful and relevant to real-life situations. The researchers also noticed substantial improvement in their vocabulary test achievement when the phases of TBLT were implemented carefully (i.e., pre-task, task cycle, and language focus).

Similarly, **Al Muhaimeed (2013**) compared TBLT with traditional instruction in terms of students' development in reading comprehension skills. His study targeted four third-grade classes comprised of 122 EFL students of intermediate level. Analyzing the data collected from a pre- and post-test and an observation of the classrooms, the findings showed that TBLT contributed to an increase in students' reading comprehension scores compared with traditional teaching. Unlike traditional teaching, TBLT helped students develop positive attitudes toward the learning situations. The findings can be taken as a general recommendation for the application of TBLT in EFL classrooms.

More recently, **Newton and Bui (2017)** investigated the effectiveness of TBLT in EFL primary school classrooms and explored the affordances and challenges facing teachers when implementing this instructional approach. The qualitative data were obtained through the observation of 7 EFL teachers and the interview with those teachers. The study was comprised of two phases; in the first phase the teacher used the PPP approach in teaching a speaking lesson whereas the second phase was redesigned to be a more task-based speaking lesson. Teachers of the first phase followed the PPP approach that was more "oriented toward form-focused practice" of a particular language feature

(p. 267). Analyzing the data obtained through the observation of peer interaction as well as the follow-up interviews with the teachers in the second phase, there emerged three affordances, which did not appear in the first phase of PPP, when implementing task-based lessons, namely, "pushed output" where the need to express meaning pushed the learners to use the L2, " peer scaffolding and negotiation of meaning", and more "learner engagement" (pp. 269-272). Despite teachers' positive attitudes toward the learning opportunities because of the task-based speaking lessons, they expressed three main concerns and challenges when implementing TBLT in their EFL classrooms, including: the preparation time to design materials for task-based lesson, the difficulty to give clear task instructions, and the insufficient time for the third phase of the task-based lesson where students do not get adequate focus-on-form practice.

Notwithstanding challenges that might occur when implementing TBLT approach, the studies reviewed above all demonstrate that TBLT has the potential to contribute to increased language proficiency and learning opportunities. More importantly, it can also create a highly motivating learning environment where students cooperate with each other to achieve a communicative goal that meets their needs for using the language inside and outside the classroom setting.

After delving into many topics and issues concerning TBLT, I can conclude that with all its constraints and deficiencies, TBLT remains an effective instructional approach that can yield fruitful outcomes in students' proficiency levels and their academic achievement as well. The genesis of this approach stems from the need to engage learners in real-life contexts where they freely express meaning using their existing resources of language. Thereby, I conceive of TBLT as a powerful approach

having the potential to create more meaningful learning opportunities for my EFL learners.

Like many other teachers, I might be constrained by certain obstacles that could prevent me from attempting this approach in every case, such as ready-made textbooks, assessment mandates, curriculum constraints, time limitations, and many others. However, as Ellis (2015) comments, “While policy makers and education ministries may set directions and form proposals, it is what teachers do in classrooms which directly affects the success of any reform agenda” (p. 381). Accordingly, from my own teaching experience, it is worthwhile to adapt and redesign at least some pre-existing materials to make them more task-based and task-oriented. As a beginning attempt, I do believe that incorporating at least a few tasks at some points where possible into the ready-made curriculum is an opportunity to gauge the efficacy of this approach in my EFL context.

LOOKING FORWARD

After completing my studies in the MSLT program, I look forward to applying all the invaluable insights gained throughout my study journey and actually practicing them in my EFL classrooms in Oman. I plan to continue teaching EFL school students as I have found myself with them for many years. The resulting confidence gained as a graduate of the MSLT program will guide my students toward effective learning.

As I resume teaching, I would like to begin grounding my lessons on communication and practical use of language. Though difficult and unwarranted to cast aside the mandated curriculum, I want to modify many existing activities and design new, more communicative and task-based ones. I also want to test my newfound techniques and strategies and see how effectively they function with my EFL students.

Additionally, I look forward to passing on the knowledge and personal teaching experiences I have gained to my EFL teacher colleagues, as I do believe that sharing knowledge with others can further enhance the joy of teaching. I can accomplish that by conducting workshops and inviting teachers to observe my classes.

I don’t want to stop at this level of educational pursuit; I want to seek out all the opportunities that can advance my teaching capabilities. I might continue with further studies in second language teaching. I will endeavor to always keep abreast of all the updates in teaching English as a foreign language, through reading extensively the latest pedagogy research, attending conferences, and getting involved in different teacher trainings. Learning and teaching are both lifetime pursuits.

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