

## English language-learning environments in COVID-19 era

Nguyen Van My

Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

\*Corresponding author: Email: [nguyenmydhsptphcm@gmail.com](mailto:nguyenmydhsptphcm@gmail.com)

### *Abstract*

No doubt that English education is a complex process, and its successes depend on many variables. Of these, English language-learning environments for regular practice are commonly accepted as a prerequisite in the contexts of English as a foreign language (EFL). Unfortunately, the questions of what English language-learning environments exactly are and how these are to be implemented have not been well addressed. The present paper reviews the literature on the concept of English language-learning environments and identifies approaches for successful applications of those environments for English language education. The present paper contributes to the growing body of literature on foreign language education and draws special attention to English language teaching theories (ELT).

**Keywords:** EFL contexts, English-language environments, technology-based approach, English language learning

### INTRODUCTION

In today's second and foreign language classrooms in South East Asia, the main purpose of teaching and learning is to develop the learners' communicative proficiency in the target language (TL). The field of English language teaching (ELT) has been witnessing considerable changes and developments in its theories and practices. These attempts involve investigating solutions to raise the effectiveness of English education and to keep up with the rapid developments of society. In addition to issues such as the teaching methods, content, activities, and teaching materials, it must be said that the implementation of English language-learning environments requires appropriate teaching approaches which facilitate opportunities for the learners to immerse in the English language inside and outside classrooms.

The questions of how to effectively create an English language-learning environment have not mostly addressed. As an attempt to highlight special attention to the crucial understanding of methods in the teaching process, the present study proposes brief explanations on the English language-learning environment and identifies critical relationships between basic components, finally ending with pedagogical applications of its theories into the English language instructions as a foreign language (EFL). In response to society's rapid development, a shift away from the disciplinary knowledge, which is not persuasive and evident enough, toward applications of the interdisciplinary knowledge to solve systematic and complicated problems. Similarly, the author proposes a preliminary model of the English language-learning environment structures based on an analysis of the critical theories concerning ELT theories, sociolinguistics, social psychology, and systematic theories.

### RATIONALE

Theories of English language-learning environments, which have been developed throughout the history of language education worldwide since the 1970s, are commonly known as an emphasis on the use of language inside and outside classrooms. It is widely acknowledged that there are two kinds of linguistic environments – formal linguistic environments and informal linguistic environments. As distinguished by Krashen (1976), the use of active language happens irregularly in the formal environments (classrooms), as opposed to the informal environments, in which the active language is regularly used in the concepts of English as a second language (ESL) [8].

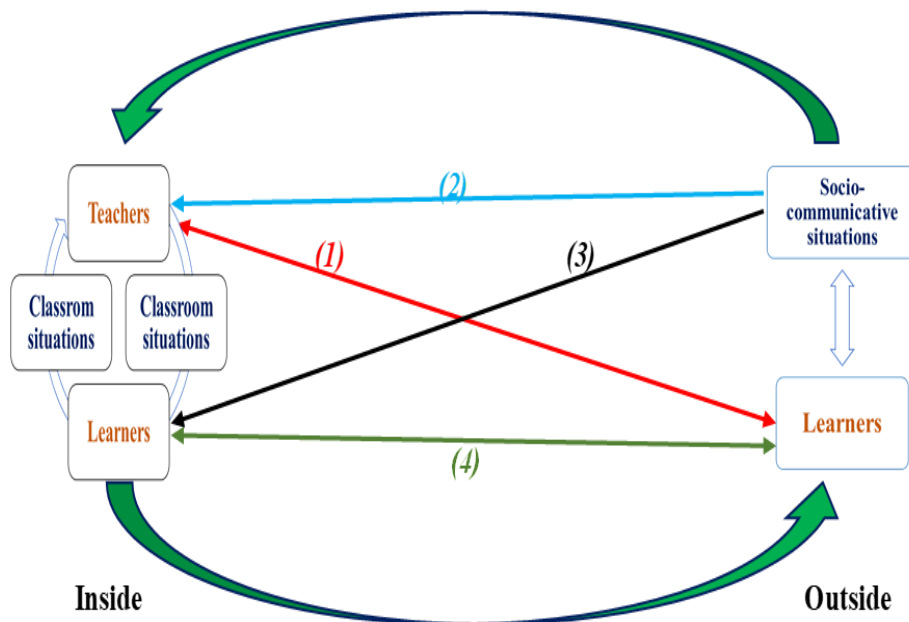
It would be wrong to state that the classification as mentioned above is entirely appropriate to a variety of today's English language teaching and learning contexts. In other words, it is essential to make a distinction between the ESL contexts and the EFL contexts or other contexts, for each case, the context in which the teaching takes place is very different, requiring differences in materials, syllabuses, and methodologies (Carter & Nunan, 2001) [3]. In the ESL

contexts including the United Kingdom, the United States, or countries in Africa (i.e., Nigeria and Zambia), as mentioned by Ellis (1994), English plays an institutional and social role in the community (e.g., its functions as a recognized means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother language) [6]. On the contrary, EFL is used in contexts where English is neither widely used for communication nor used as the medium of instruction (i.e., Brazil, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam) [6]. For the outside-classroom environment creating, learners use English in real-life situations in which they set themselves demanding goals and express English purposely and meaningfully. Nevertheless, it isn't easy to establish the outside-classroom environment in the EFL contexts because the learners mostly do not need to use English in socio-communicative situations (frequently use mother language instead).

In most EFL contexts, including Vietnam, similarly, learners have fewer opportunities for English practices (focusing mainly on learning activities inside classrooms), even having no in some cases, the English instructions are only implemented in mother language (L1). Despite spending much time learning English, there is a mismatch between the ability in English inside classrooms and the use of English in real-life communicative situations. It is increasingly important that the English language-learning environments play an essential role in the success of English teaching and learning in the EFL contexts.

**ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Based on the analysis mentioned above, a "closed-English ecology" conceptual model was empirically designed to account for the English language-learning environment settings (Figure 1). In this conceptual model, the two main components of the English language-learning environments are the inside-classroom and outside-classroom environment creating. To be more specific, creating an inside-classroom environment is the implementation of teaching approaches that enthusiastically stimulate classroom interactions to use English as much as possible. Depending on particular contexts, the outside-classroom English language-learning environments can be created by facilitating much-needed conditions, especially social life-illustrating situations for repeated English practices beyond classrooms.

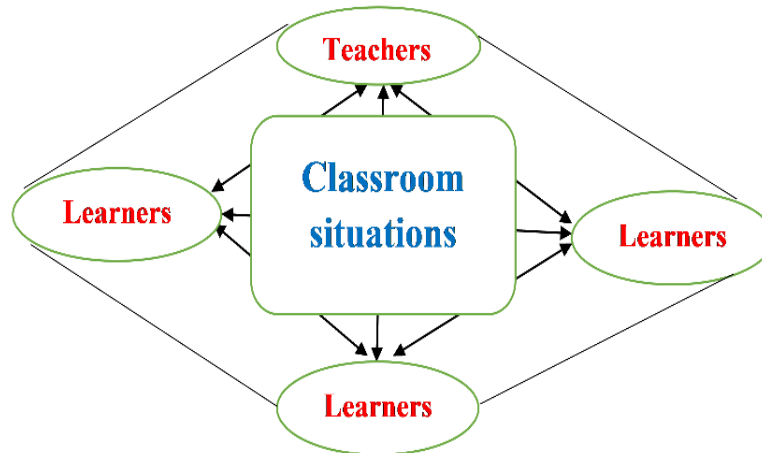


**Figure 1:** The structure of the English language-learning environment

*(1) The interactions between teachers and learners inside and outside classrooms*

*The inside-class interactions*

In English classrooms, explanations of classroom interactions here focus primarily on the *purposeful* use of the English language from the teacher and learners, at least in the teacher's questions or feedback and the learners' responses through classroom situations (Figure 2). In this regard, Tsui (2001) proposes that the effectiveness of the classroom situations (a means of classroom interactions) is reflected in how the teachers create opportunities for learners to engage in the production of English [12]. To be more consistent with the English language-learning environment's notions, classroom situations are considered classroom tasks and learning activities for learners to communicate in English with the teachers or other learners interactively.



**Figure 2:** The illustrations of inside-class interactions

Relating to the effectiveness of classroom interactions, it is essential to discuss the roles of the learner's willingness to interact or collaborate. This is particularly due to the fact that the learners only interact with others in classrooms or social life on the condition that they have certain purposes or needs. Many important arguments suggested by the literature propose that when teaching structures meet the learners' expectations or enable learners to be more active in their learning, the teaching will be more effective (Dörnyei, 1998; Tudor, 1996) [5] [13]. Furthermore, the learners' willingness depends on either internal factors (i.e., genders and ages, the characteristics, knowledge background, language backgrounds including the level of English, personal backgrounds, motivations, or expectations) or external factors (i.e., learning environments, similarities in cultural backgrounds of partners, or teaching approaches). More importantly, the increase of teacher-learner interactions (especially young learners) relates to the teacher's styling identity. Based on the teachers' characteristics or social-life backgrounds (the social-psychological approach), the teacher's styling identity might include "open-minded styles" and "close-minded styles." For the teachers with the open-minded styling identity, it is believed that their interactions with learners may be open and friendlier, as opposed to the close-minded styling identity ones. Depending on the local contextual details, however, the teachers' styling identity contains different considerations, whether positives or negatives.

To conclude this extensive discussion, it is important to design appropriate classroom situations to promote the use of English as much as possible effectively. For learners' background diversity, it is required that many reviews of different aspects relevant, the social-psychology included, have strong influences on the interactions between the teacher and learners or among groups of learners inside classrooms. In other cases, the teacher is involved in an integral part that provides learners with opportunities for developing positive self-images and raising their willingness to interact in English with others.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that the English language-learning approaches' effectiveness is also dependent on the teachers' professionals. Based on real-life classroom observations, the teacher stimulates the use of English inside classrooms, especially instructing learning activities, supporting the learners as language resources, or encouraging learners to produce English in the teaching process. In English proverbs, it is often said that "*Nothing can succeed without the help of the teacher*", compared to a Vietnamese proverb "*Không Thầy đồ mài làm nên*". In a study conducted in the Vietnamese context, Canh and Renandya (2017) found that teachers with high proficiency are more confident in the use of target language and develop more interesting and engaging classroom causing target language and developing proficiency in English and their understanding of ELT methodologies impact little or much on the teaching process's success.

### *The outside-class interactions*

For the success of the English language-learning approaches outside class, it is vitally important to establish a friendly learning environment for English practices. To meet the objective, the teacher must be in the role of an instructor or a co-learner who provides learners with advanced necessities for regularly practicing English outside classrooms and inspires them to be more active in the learning process. Of these necessities, the teacher frequently engages learners in learning tasks or required-suitably projects in which they are able to recall and apply linguistic competencies (i.e., vocabulary, lexico-grammar, or grammatical structures) in the production of the four-English skills. It seems understandable that the teacher should be a source of motivation for continuously enhancing English competencies outside classrooms.

### **(2)-(3) *The effects of socio-communicative situations***

In this review, the socio-communicative situations are defined as real-life opportunities for learners to transfer what they learn in lessons to the daily use of English (both oral and written production). Not surprisingly, the socio-communicative situations are affective variables associated with the use of English from the learners outside classrooms. These situations mostly remain in the community where members speak English as a mother language (L1), a second language (ESL), or a “lingua franca” (English is considered a common language in a multilingual community where the people speak many languages, for example, European communities).

Despite having many different arguments, the globally rapid spread of English has remarkably changed English's status in many parts of the world. It is estimated that over 100 countries (e.g., China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt, and Brazil) where English is widely taught as a foreign language (Crystal, 2016) [4]. The EFL learners are likely motivated by the so-called means for integration, of which English is considered an international language. The primary purpose of learning English from the EFL learners is to be more proficient in the four-English skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing), which help them meet the current labor markets' requirement. It might make learners focus on the learning process and enormously engage their purposes in the high efforts to learn English.

In addition to making sure that the teaching approaches for setting inputs (linguistic competencies) are comprehensive, similarly, those for the output of English (communicative competencies) are lively and purposeful. Regarding the discussion, “communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (Savignon, 1972, as cited by Hadley, 1993) [7]. For the successful settings of the dynamic exchanges between the input and output, the teacher appropriately selects more purposeful learning resources and design authentic activities with intercultural contents approachable in socio-communicative situations. A reasonable reason is that the learners are frequently motivated by some common topics related to their hobbies or interests and their available understandings. As pedagogical practices, the teacher needs to regularly update the methodology suited to the rapid development of society so that they can select appropriate socio-communicative situations for demonstrating in English classrooms, which are more responsive to the learners' diverse backgrounds (e.g., genders and ages, knowledge backgrounds, backgrounds of English ability, or cultural backgrounds).

### **(4) *The use of English inside and outside classrooms from the learners***

Understandably, the paramount important purpose of the existence of any languages on our planet is for the people in the society to carry out socio-communicative functions. No exception in this review, especially English, is more and more important in globalization and integration today. As highlighted above, learning and teaching aim to effectively use English in real-life social situations (both oral or written production). Therefore, the flections on the learners' English use inside and outside classrooms are considerably used to evaluate the effectiveness of the English learning and teaching process. Specifically, when learners express themselves in English meaningfully and interactively in real-life situations, the English learning process's effectiveness is recognized.

## **APPROACHES FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

Before discussing how to create a linguistic environment inside classrooms effectively, it has been claimed that the practices of English depend on the proficiency of the learners (from the beginners to the advanced learners). Pedagogically, the inside-class English language-learning approaches are to motivate the use of English inside classrooms, which starts with developing linguistic competence (i.e., vocabulary, lexico-grammar, or grammatical structures) and meaningfully produces English in the classroom situations (communicative competence). According to Krashen (1976), the contributions of classrooms as the formal English language-learning environments are to provide the language input (rule isolation and feedback) to activate the developments of language use [8]. Finding an agreement with Ellis's (2002) concepts of practice and consciousness-raising, in which "the learners are provided with opportunities to practice the structures, first under controlled conditions, and then under more normal communicative conditions" [6].

As mentioned previously, the use of English inside classrooms are stimulated by the purposeful interactions between the teacher with learners or among the learners. Consequently, the English language-learning approaches to productions of English need to be implemented in a class community (i.e., work in pairs, or working in small groups). In his history of language teaching, Webb (1982) observed that learner-learner interactions in group work outstandingly expand the learners' talking time instead of only demonstrating what they have learned [14]. In some cases, roleplays are effective in creating needed opportunities for practices of English inside classrooms. Relatively few empirical studies conducted to investigate the effectiveness of roleplays in teaching English in Vietnam; as explained by Nguyen (2019), role plays and dramatizations enable learners to use English in a funny and interesting way when illustrating communicative situations related to their lives (i.e., greetings, booking rooms in a hotel, clothes, and weather) and gradually develop the learners' fluency in English [9].

On the other hand, the effectiveness of activities based on interpersonal skills (i.e., small groups or pairs) requires a highly well-prepared process from the teacher. These well-established stages are not only in preparing learners for group work but also in designing appropriate learning tasks and monitoring what learners are doing in class. More importantly, small-group work learning tasks need to be sufficiently open-ended and challenging to engage learners in higher-order thinking without being too confusing. In a series of classroom observations, Battistich et al. (1993) propose that the use of group work is negatively related to achievement if group interaction is disrespectful or unequal [1]. In a classroom, some learners, in this case, have some difficulties interacting positively with others due to a lack of the social skills necessary (i.e., team-working skills or communicative skills) and diversity of social background. To deal with these problems, learners should be explicitly trained in communicative skills, namely paraphrasing or listening to other people's ideas before using small group work.

In addition to the mentioned-above activities, discussion in a group or whole class settings actively promotes learner-learner interactions inside the class. In day-to-day practice, however, the discussion needs to be carefully prepared and usually needs to follow on from some prior activities such as a previous lesson on a certain topic. In this sense, the teachers should enable learners to prepare their own ideas for a particular topic before the lesson. Subsequently, the teachers need to clearly set out the purpose of the discussion from the start to keep it focused and to the point. During the discussion, the teacher needs to respond to the learners' ideas in such a flexible way as to encourage them to clarify and be more conscious of their thought processes.

## **APPROACHES FOR OUTSIDE-CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

It is well-known that a cutting-edge difference between the EFL contexts and the other contexts, including ESL contexts or native English contexts, is that the use of English as a means of communication irregularly happens in social-life situations. As a consequence, the English language-learning approaches are to generate much-needed conditions in which learners are able to apply linguistic competence to meaningful productions of English in both oral and written outside classrooms. To help students to transfer what they learn to real-world situations, applied activities should be more authentic or as close to real-world experiences as possible. It is vitally significant for the teachers to flexibly take advantage of onsite environments when hands-on practice needs to match real-world scenarios and engage multiple senses (e.g., face-to-face interaction with people or hands-on interaction with physical objects).

Actions for the aforementioned purposes, using group-work settings outside classrooms, improve learners' interactions and engagements with ongoing English practices. One of these learning types, project-based learning (PBL), being a student-centered form of learning that involves students spending sustained periods of study time exploring and attempting to solve real-life problems, is an appropriate choice for this situation. As a matter of fact, applying project-

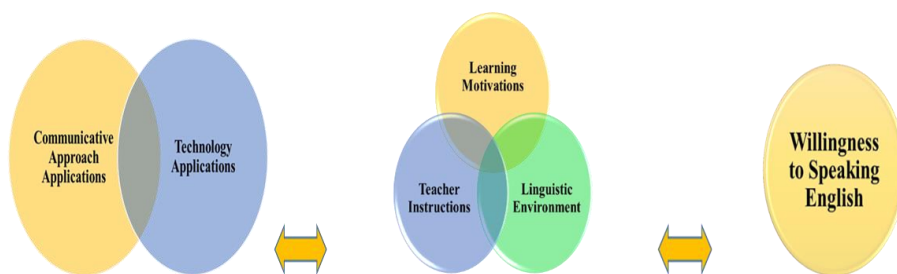
based activities into English teaching facilitates opportunities for learners to engage what they learn in real-world situations outside classrooms. Nevertheless, project-based learning also contains some problems in teaching and learning English. For example, the question of how to effectively individualize participation or learning outcome evaluations needs to be considered carefully when applying project-based learning approaches.

## TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Today's communication needs are more and more expanding over the borders of each nation because of globalization. Of these demands, cultural understanding or academic exchanges between domestic learners and international learners are increasingly becoming necessary. In other words, there are the existences of purposeful interactions between the communities around the world. To successfully engage these interactions in the English classrooms, applying advancements of technology is a reasonable consideration. As technology innovations rapidly expand the universe of possibilities in many areas, online technologies facilitate closer connections among learners of English around the world. Based on social networks' advancements, learners of English advantageously make communication with native speakers in purposeful situations.

Furthermore, continual advancements in technology and Internet connections possibly offer EFL learners enormous opportunities to approach the near-native learning environment. These resources are useful for the teacher to select authentic materials with intercultural content. Easily observed in real-life situations, learners are extremely interested in trendy events on social networks (e.g., Facebook, Zalo, or native English Vloggers on Youtube). In some cases, the teachers could guide learners on using available learning resources, enabling them to develop self-directed learning skills at home in unstressed ways. Reinders and White (2010) commented that technology is applied to individualize the language learning process and offers learners language learning opportunities outside the classroom as well [11].

Regards creating the English language-learning environments for the regular practice of English in the contexts of teaching English as a foreign language, Nguyen (2020) suggests a conceptual framework for integrating technology into the communicative language teaching activities to motivate learners to speak English (Figure 3). From the findings of his empirical study, integrating computer and smartphone assistants into communicative language activities (i.e., roleplays and dramatizations, project-based activities, and opinion-sharing activities) enables learners to interact with the English language with variously interesting hands-on activities both inside and outside the classroom and slightly enhances the learner's performances in English speaking [10].



**Figure 3:** Conceptual framework for integrating technology into the communicative language teaching activities to motivate learners to speak English

## CONCLUSION

It must be concluded that the English language-learning environment is repeatedly defined as the implementation of appropriate teaching approaches that enthusiastically promote the regular practices of English from learners. It is a prerequisite in English contexts as a foreign language (EFL). In light of the views expressed in the present paper, the concepts of the English language-learning environments in EFL contexts differ from the ones in the ESL concepts. In most EFL contexts, opportunities for using English occur regularly in classrooms (formal language environments), compared with the ESL contexts, “a distinction must be made between informal environments in which active language use occurs regularly and those in which language use is irregular” (Krashen, 1976, p.157) [8]. From theories to practices, this paper respectively extends understanding of what English language-learning environments are or how to model the structures of its components. To illustrate this, the author reviews a variety of concepts and draws a

model of the English language-learning environments for the acquisition of English in EFL contexts. The model of the English language-learning environments exactly explains what main components and their roles are, or what the teachers and learners do in the English acquisition process. Furthermore, the author reveals some suggestions for successful applications of its theories in real-life practices. It is hoped that the present paper extends the literature review in the field of English language teaching and draws special attention to the importance of the English language-learning environment for English acquisition, besides the focus on theories of ELT methodology from ELT scholars around the world.

### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mr. **Nguyen Van My** is an early researcher in language acquisition and language studies and an English and Russian teacher as foreign languages. He received formal training in teaching English and Russian as foreign languages at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam. His current research interests include language teaching methodology, curriculum developments, technology in language teaching, learner motivations, and language assessments. His research interests are reflected in his publications in the areas of *English language teaching and technology* and *language assessments*.

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