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Mapping out Learning Environments for University Students of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract. The article presents some problematic aspects of conceptualising empowering learning environments in the contexts of learning English at university, related to the need of increasing EFL learning opportunities. The discussion is based on the theoretical framework of empowering learning environments for university students. It aims to provide the guidelines for an integrated approach towards designing EFL learning environments, which correspond to the contemporary approach of foreign language learning as well as students' needs to acquire communication competence, necessary for efficient performance in working life.

Introduction

Over the recent decade, as a result of an increasing demand for proficiency in English as a feature of employability, a great number of Lithuanians realised the need to add English to their linguistic repertoire (e.g. Vaitekūnaitė, 2000). However, although the need of English is quite apparent, and, as many believe, English has replaced Russian as a second language in everyday social contexts, the opportunities of being exposed to natural linguistic contexts are still quite rare. Learning English, as well as other foreign languages, still relies on educational settings. The institutions of higher education face a difficult task of developing students' communicative competence on the basis of their previous knowledge with the focus on the needs of effective performance in their future work places.

A limited exposure to the language in everyday life, as well as a number of problems resulting from a big number of students in language classrooms, limited hours of teaching, determine the importance of developing learning environments that are supportive of the educational process. They should correspond to the students' needs and create optimal conditions for enabling their efficient performance.

Ramsden (1992), Holmberg (1996), Bowden and Marton (1998), Biggs (1999), Jucevičienė (1998), Lipinskienė (1999) are among foreign and Lithunian researchers who have discussed the aspects of development of learning environments as a research problem. The impact of learning environments in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has been analysed by Allwright (1991), Edmondson (1991), Kramsch (1991). However, in his review of the research on EFL learning environments, Allwright notes that we should take an heuristic approach towards the concept of learning environments: 'the characterisation of teaching and learning environments is something that must still come from research, rather than something we are ready to impose upon it' (Allwright, 1991: 161).

What is more, the research on the impact of learning environments in learning EFL has not been concerned with the specifics of university as a learning environment. Drawing on the contemporary changes in social, economic, technological and other contexts and the need for higher education to respond to them, Lipinskienė distinguishes two aspects, which have to be taken into consideration in the research on effective learning and adequate learning environments. University learning environments should correspond to the students' needs and create optimal conditions for enabling their efficient performance (Lipinskienė, in press). In terms of language learning, the idea may be elaborated that they should support

> 'effective language learning (which) has to involve learning about oneself as a language learner and learning to function as a language user independently of a teacher' (Sheerin, 1997: 63).

The present paper will attempt to provide an explorative approach to the object of environments for learning EFL at university by discussing not only the issues resulting from the research on EFL learning environments, but also specific aspects of the higher education context. The **goal** of the paper is *to discuss the aspects of empowering learning environments as regards learning/teaching English at university*. The paper **aims** to:

1) discuss the approach towards learning EFL,
2) present conditions and features of empowering learning environments,
3) discuss them from the point of view of learning EFL at university. The discussion is based on the analysis of research literature.

The paper consists of three parts. The first part discusses the approach towards learning EFL, the second part presents conditions and features of empowering learning environments; they are discussed from the point of view of learning EFL in the third part, which also points out some of the problems related to the conception of learning environments in EFL.

Approach towards Learning EFL

It is important to clarify the approach to learning EFL before attempting to elaborate on the attributes that influence the process.

One of the trends in research on language learning has preoccupied itself with learning in functional terms, viewing it as a result of the necessity to communicate meaning in social settings (Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 122). Although the significance of interaction is evident in this approach, a detailed examination of its influence on the development of communicative competence has remained beyond the scope of this research trend. Recent research developments, however, are marked by attention to social terms and view interactions, in which the learners are engaged, as the most significant source of language learning. This approach was largely influenced by Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input for language learning. Edmondson (1991: 181) draws on the hypothesis that 'the quality of the interaction that takes place in classrooms essentially determines what is learnt there.' Edmondson distinguishes three reasons in favour of the conception of language learning as interaction:

1) 'learner outputs also act as input to that learner's own processing mechanisms',
2) 'learner outputs also act as input for other learners in the same environment',
3) 'what learners say may clearly determine what will happen next'.

In addition to psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic issues, justifications for the 'interactionist' conception of learning can also be found in general educational literature. Holmberg, for instance, also notes the interactive quality of learning, which is defined as situated and context-dependent (Holmberg, 1996: 13). This particular approach is useful for the purposes of focusing on learning environments, since it assumes a significant impact of learning environments on learning process and an interactive quality of the relationship between learners and the environments they find themselves in.

Another issue that has to be pointed out in relation to the conception of language learning is its process-oriented quality, which has been widely accepted in language learning theories (Edmondson, 1991: 181). Communication competence and language proficiency are regarded in terms of developmental stages rather than as a finite product, which has to be developed in the process of learning. This quality has wider implications with respect to learning English at university. On the one hand, the future workplace-oriented education determines the need for vocationally oriented language learning (Brewster, 1995). On the other hand, in the educational process, as it is impossible to consider and model all the infinity of communicative situations and contexts which students will encounter in the future. Therefore, the purpose of language teaching is to enable students for engagement in an on-going process of independent learning through interaction in different workplace contexts.

Empowering Learning Environments: Features and Conditions

On the basis of the review of recent research on university learning, Lipinskienė has come up with the following features of empowering learning environments:

> *student's autonomy, responsibility, participation, organisational ability to accept mistakes and failures, to create supporting culture, to ensure access to different resources, to ensure high quality feedback and carry out a new role of the teacher as enabler (Lipinskienė, in press).*

The features apparently fall into two sets. The first is related to students' abilities to engage themselves in the educational process, whereas the second is concerned with organisational contributions to the process.

According to Lipinskienė, in order to ensure the development of student-centered attributes of empowering learning environments, educational institutions have to create optimal conditions, which may be divided into three categories: competence-based, psychological, and material (Lipinskienė, 1999). Competence-based conditions, on the one hand, are manifested by the teacher's competence, which corresponds to the requirements of context and activity. It is related to the teacher's ability to determine adequate workload, ensure curriculum flexibility, provide adequate feedback and assessment. On the other hand, they also subsume students' competence, based on their previous education, necessary to engage in a specific educational process.

Psychological conditions are meant to provide students with favourable affective context in the educational process. They share the element of adequate assessment with competence-based conditions. In addition, successful adaptation, as well as supportive climate and culture, are important elements of psychological conditions. Lipinskienė also emphasises the importance of learning contracts as a means of co-ordinating the teacher's and the student's values and expectations towards each other, and seeking for psychological comfort.

The third set of conditions, referred to as material, is related to the development of comfortable and modern physical environment of learning, which provides students with opportunities for independent learning and using self-access materials. Material conditions also imply that teaching methods and materials correspond to the students' needs (Lipinskienė, 1999).

Thus it appears that efficient development of learning environments relies on the provision of the above-mentioned conditions; they are initiated by educational institutions in order to establish the features of empowering learning environments. However, one has to consider the fact that

> 'what constitutes an individual's learning environment is <…> a combination of external constraints and mediating resources, as well as means provided by the learner and what (s)he perceives as useful' Holmberg (1996: 12).

Holmberg also notes that not all the means provided by the organization are identified by the learner. One may assume that it is not sufficient to provide learners with the empowering means; the educational process should

involve measures, which help the learner locate those means and make optimal use of them.

At this point it is relevant to ask a question about the implications of these aspects of empowering learning environments for learning in EFL classrooms. The following discussion will focus on some of the above-presented issues from the point of view of learning EFL at university. It will concentrate on the problematic issues rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive picture of factors that influence EFL learning environments.

Empowering Learning Environments in Learning EFL

With reference to language learning, the above presented groups of features of empowering learning environments may be amplified by the constituents found in the differentiation between *internal* and *external* factors influencing classroom learning (Edmondson, 1991). According to Edmondson,

> external factors of classroom learning are constituted by 'socio-cultural setting, educational system, and what observable events actually occur in the classroom ("input")'. On the other hand, internal factors comprise cognitive factors, as well as affective/personality variables (Edmondson, 1991: 183).

Socio-cultural setting and educational system can considerably influence language learning. As mentioned above, it is likely that the requirements of the labour market result in learners' instrumental motivation for learning the language. In line with the idea that not only immediate learning environment may act as a powerful motivator or demotivator, one may find examples of positive or negative influence of educational system. In her analysis of educational potential of linguistic environment at university, Kerevičienė notes that

> *linguistic environment* of an organisation is an intrinsic part of organizational culture, which may have either additive or detrimental effect on general educational processes (Kerevičienė, 1997: 157).

Linguistic environment first of all refers to the scope of educational processes performed in foreign languages. Educational processes, which do not incorporate English as a means of communication between the organisation and wider social as well as international contexts have a demotivating effect on students' attitudes towards language learning. In other words, educational organisations, which lack communicative character, fail to support the development of this quality in the students and, consequently, empower them for successful language learning.

One has to consider the idea of *empowerment* as it appears in EFL research contexts. In reference to the term of empowerment, Pennycook points out that one of the most problematic aspects of this concept is its transitive character, which is often added to it:

> 'empowerment is frequently used in a transitive sense as if something done to students' (Pennycook, 1997: 45).

Pennycook draws on Ruiz' (1991) suggestion that often we should rather use the term 'voice' rather than 'language'. Thus, in terms of language learning, the modern way of understanding it, is expressed as acquiring voice for expressing ourselves in culturally alternative contexts, and, therefore, being able to perform in wider contexts of social activity. It follows that the essence of empowering learning environments is to provide favourable conditions for students' acquisition of their own voice in different cultural contexts. However, learning environments are not omnipotent determiners of learning outcomes. As students' ability of expressing themselves develops as a result of their interaction with the learning environment, educational outcomes are to a large extent determined by the students' stance in the process of learning.

The discussions on the concept of empowerment in EFL context are often developed in relation to the concept of *autonomy* (Ruiz, 1991; Pennycook, 1997). Autonomy, or a developed 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action' as it is defined by Little (1991: 4, italics omitted), seems to provide a powerful starting point for successful interaction between learners and their learning environment. In the process of learning, however, there is a danger of oversimplified conceptualization of autonomy, which is not likely to result in plausible teaching practices and desirable learning outcomes. Pennycook points out the need for a comprehensive notion of autonomy:

> 'if language educators take up the notion of autonomy in language learning merely in terms of developing strategies for self-directed learning, or, in its most reductionist version, sending students to a self-access centre to study on their own, they may be denying their responsibilities as language educators to help students to find the cultural alternatives they deserve' (Pennycook, 1997: 53).

Similarly to the notion of empowerment, autonomy is still often conceptualised as some power of learning, which can be transferred onto the learners by the teacher (Little, 1991: 3). This view is also related to a reductionist understanding of autonomy, which is detached from educational principles and reality. Language educators face a complex task of exploring the ways of *developing* students' capacity for autonomous learning rather than trying to make them instantaneously adopt the principles of autonomous learning. Multifaceted as it may appear, the notion of autonomy still seems one of the most important attributes of empowering learning environments, since it is closely interrelated with a number of other features, such as students' responsibility and participation. It also implies the capacity of identifying and making use of material resources and other means provided by the organisation to support learning.

One of the frequently emerging problematic issues in relation to the notion of autonomy is the teacher's role. Voller has proposed a more elaborate approach to autonomous language learning, which is based on the idea of *negotiation*:

> '...the teacher's role in autonomous learning can be characterised essentially as one of negotiation, both with learners and external authorities (representatives of the educational institution, and professionals from the discourse communities to which learners are trying to gain admittance) about the syllabus, and, as a participant in and facilitator of

the learning process, with learners in their classroom and self-access learning activities' (Voller, 1997: 109).

In addition, Voller also perceives negotiation as a way of preventing the tendency to marginalise the teacher's role, which has been apparent along the growing popularity of so called autonomous approaches to learning (Voller, 1997: 111).

The idea of negotiation as interaction may be perceived as an elaboration of the above-adopted line of 'interactionist' conceptualisation of language learning, which offers new learning opportunities. Although one may legitimately argue that the teacher's roles as counsellor, resource, or facilitator (all implied by the term of the teacher as enabler) are no less important features of empowering learning environments than the aspect of negotiation, the latter may be ascribed particular significance in the context of empowering learning environments. The reason for this lies in the idiosyncratic quality of learning and perception of learning environments, based on the psychology of personal constructs (e.g. Little, 1991: 19), as well as empirical research in the context of EFL (e.g. Allwright 1991: 162). Allwright notes that

> 'the external and observable aspects of learning opportunities are not themselves determinant but have their influence only in interaction with the way in which they are construed by the learners individually' (Allwright, 1991: 171).

This idea relates to the perspective of the learner, taken in the concept of a learning environment, pointed out by Holmberg (1996: 12). It is of prime importance in terms of research on learning environments, as it points out the necessity of considering individual differences of perception of learning environments in order to elaborate on the most efficient ways of developing them.

Therefore, with reference to the teacher's role, it may be worthy widening the repertoire of responsibilities attributed to the teacher as negotiator to include elicitation and analysis of individual constructs of learning environments. Generalised results of such analysis might be an important contribution for future research on mapping out learning environments.

Conclusions:

- 'Interactionist' and process-oriented approach towards learning EFL, imply a mutual interactive quality of the relationship between the learner and the learning environment.
- In addition to the general features and conditions, which influence EFL learning environments, they are largely affected by the socio-cultural context and the atmosphere within the educational organisation, particularly its linguistic environment.
- The conceptions of empowerment, as helping students to find their voice in different cultural contexts, and autonomy, as students' capacity to identify and use the

means provided by the learning environment, are important features of supportive learning environments. The teacher as negotiator may facilitate the process of developing these qualities, which relate to the development of communicative competence for efficient linguistic performance in culturally alternative contexts.
- Due to the idiosyncratic character of learning and students' needs, the future empirical research on EFL learning environments should consider students' perspective towards the learning environments they find themselves in.

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Anglų kalbos mokymosi aplinkos kūrimo universitete aspektai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariami probleminiai įgalinančių mokymosi aplinkų sampratos ir jų kūrimo aspektai anglų kalbos mokymosi universitete požiūriu. Analizuojant mokslinę literatūrą akcentuojamas poreikis praturtinti universitetinę anglų kalbos mokymosi aplinką naujomis edukacinėmis galimybėmis. Anglų kalbos mokymosi aplinkos samprata grindžiama interaktyvaus užsienio kalbos mokymosi koncepcija bei studijuoti įgalinančios aplinkos sąlygų ir bruožų samprata. Nurodoma integruoto požiūrio į anglų kalbos mokymosi universitete aplinkos, ugdančios komunikacinę būsimųjų specialistų kompetenciją, kūrimą svarba bei pabrėžiamas tolimesnių mokslinių šios srities tyrimų poreikis.

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