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Out-of-class use of English and EFL learning in Romania

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In the last three decades Romanian EFL teaching and learning has been redefined and strongly influenced by the changes experienced by the society. In this social context EFL learners and teachers have to face not only new challenges but also unprecedented benefits that demand our attention. This study aims at evaluating the out-of-class contexts that facilitate EFL learning and Leung's (1996) basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) development in order to enforce learning as much as the environmental features privilege it. The investigation on a group of EFL high school learners provides the benefits of using English outside the classroom and how it helps EFL learning.

Keywords: *EFL learning, out-of-class context, EFL learners*

1. Introduction

In a world where English is either well established or the dominant language on all six continents according to UNESCO and other world organizations, whoever is concerned with the education of young generation comes to grips with features that affect mastering this language. "English, it is generally agreed, is today in a stronger position in the world not just than any contemporary language but also than any other historical language" (Spolsky 2004, 76). According to Kachru (1985) the reality of English use today varies from the native speakers of the Inner Circle (the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and L2 speakers of the Outer Circle (former colonies of the UK or the USA, such as Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore) to the EFL learners from countries which have not been colonized by people within the Inner Circle, and they represent the Expanding Circle (China, Greece, Romania, Poland and others) where English is taught as a foreign language. Relating the present-day world to teaching English in a European country the primary goal of this paper is to analyse the current context of English learners from Romania and the way students can benefit from it in the process of EFL learning. It can be fruitful also for EFL teachers from the Outer Circle countries to have a look at a different landscape, not only to enlarge their horizons, but also to become aware

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of the possibilities they have or lack comparing with those existing in Romania. The twenty-first century's background of the young generation is strikingly different than three decades ago from political, educational, economic and social points of view because the Romanian society underwent major changes after the fall of Communism in 1989. Romania represents the second largest country in Central and East Europe and became member of the European Union on 1st January 2007. Alongside with the technological advancement, the new political arena paved the way for the place that English occupies today among the Romanian speakers as part of the Expanding circle that not only accepts the economic realities, but also synchronizes with the requisites of the current society.

1.1. English in Romania

In the survey coordinated by the European Commission carried out in 2012 in the 27 Member States of the European Union in terms of the most widely spoken foreign languages there are English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%) similar to the linguistic map presented in 2005 (Europeans and their Languages 2012, 19). The same survey notices that "two thirds of Europeans (67%) think that English is one of the two most useful languages. It is much more likely to be considered useful for personal development than any other language" (Europeans and their Languages 2012, 69).

The foreign languages studied before 1989 were Russian, French, German and English. Although French and German were preferred, Russian was however compulsory. The 1989 Revolution marked the drastic drop of learning Russian in the Romanian schools. It was gradually replaced by French, then by English, which now represents the first foreign language studied in most of the schools. "The interest for German has never been too high and French lost lots of ground to English" (Tirban 2013, 77). The compulsory curriculum from Romania provides learning two foreign languages from the fifth grade. For upper secondary education, Romania is among the countries with the highest average number of foreign languages learnt in school: from two English hours/week for a regular class and four hours for an intensive class to five or six hours weekly for bilingual classes. Intensive and bilingual classes are usually divided in two groups being taught respectively by two English teachers.

The last two decades are also marked by the growing number of qualified English teachers on the one hand, and the outburst of English course books, on the other hand, which together represent a real progress in the educational act of teaching and learning English. The Common European Framework for Modern Languages (2001) published by the Council of Europe alongside with the New Romanian National Curriculum represent the two main pillars of EFL teaching in Romania. There are also significant changes in the EFL assessment from the traditional grammar-focused Baccalaureate exam based mainly on vocabulary and semantics, grammar, texts and themes, values and attitudes until 2009 to the

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Linguistic Competencies exam according to Common European Framework from 2010 on.

2. Out-of-class contexts support EFL learning

The classroom teaching or content-based education where the concentration is on the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) according to Leung (1996) is not the research topic of this study, hitherto it is the core of formal teaching. "Focusing only on what happens inside schools is misguided. Instead, we should be drawing in the fullest possible range of resources from outside the school gate, and creating delivery systems which can provide individualized packages of support to each young person" (Bentley 1998, 73-74). At the very heart of the current paper is the concern that Norton (1997) expressed two decades ago, namely "Under what conditions do language learners speak? How can we encourage language learners to become more communicatively competent? How can we facilitate interaction between language learners and target language speakers?" (Norton 1997, 410) In other words, what is the trigger that promotes and facilitates not only English learning, but also meaningful use of it? How can we assist our students in basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) development? As long as Romania is a country from the Expanding Circle with an extremely reduced number of native speakers and native teachers that can be encountered only in a few private schools where the salary can be motivating for them to come and teach in a foreign country.

Based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, human cognition is formed through social activity, thus, learning a second or a foreign language is perceived as a semiotic process derivable by participation in social activities rather than internal cognitive processes undertaken by the individual (Block, 2003; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Drawing on Rogoff's (1994) sociocultural approach, Norton and Toohey (2001) assume that "learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to learn English" Norton and Toohey (2001, 311). And these particular, local contexts represent our research interest because they are the environmental creators for EFL learning providing opportunities for conversations in context embedded for BICS development. Studies investigating out-of-class learning experiences of L2 learners have been carried out by Campbell (1996), Brooks (1992), Suh *et al.* (1999), Schmidt and Frota (1986) in the target language environment. On the other hand, Pickard (1996) has concentrated on German students learning English in Germany, and Freeman (1999) carried out her study on French and EFL learners at a university in Britain. As Romanian EFL learners have a different context and opportunities for the use of English in contrast with the learners who live and learn in an English speaking country, we are going to look for every opportunity in order to make use of it for the learners' benefit. From the very start, it is obvious that the amount of

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opportunities for learning and using English that is offered by the Romanian society is reduced, reason that makes us be much more aware of them and increase the benefits learners can gain from it as much as possible. “This is another reason why education is so important. To make full use of the resources that an information society offers, we must be able to handle the overload, to develop capacities which can make sense of it all without screening out things that might be valuable” (Bentley 1998, 3).

From their research and theoretical discussions, Norton and Toohey (2001) argue for “attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2s” and “the importance of examining the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts” (318). They consider this dual focus as an important complement to earlier studies for understanding the good language learning. Pointing out to Norton and Toohey’s (2001) discussion regarding social practices, Ushioda (2008) considers also that “the success of good language learners depends very much on the degree and quality of access to a variety of conversations in their communities, and not just on processes of internalizing linguistic forms and meanings. The extent to which the surrounding social practices facilitate or constrain learners’ access to the linguistic resources of their communities will affect the quality and level of language learning success” (Ushioda 2008, 23). As we are concerned with the burgeoning of EFL learning product we are compelled to look at the surrounding social practices of the target learners to understand to what degrees it can be used to promote and increase learning. “Informal social networks, which provide information, support, positive examples and role models, are often absent from the lives of young people who do not fulfil their educational potential. Schools often unintentionally entrench this isolation by failing to make themselves open to the wide range of support and influence which lie untapped in their local communities” (Bentley 1998, 73-74).

Leung (1996, 26) drawing on Cummins’ distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) encourages teachers to provide supportive context for learners in order to bring in the classroom the benefits of the environment. Hitherto, Leung recognizes that “What is appropriate contextual support and realistic expectation of learning outcome today may not be appropriate or sufficiently demanding tomorrow” (1996, 38). This paper focuses on the learners’ contexts which provide BICS without any intervention of the teacher, as long as they are part of their social life. And Wardgaugh and Fuller (2015) encourage us to look at the virtual networks offered by the “recent availability of computers, smart phones, and other devices has produced entirely new types of networking which many people now use extensively” that function now as speech communities (71). However, there comes the teacher’s role to be aware of these factors and use them as a complementary tool in the teaching and learning process.

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3. Case study

The main aim of the study is to determine how informants' context molded by the society in which they live and develop offers them opportunities for use of English and improvement of BICS in EFL learning. One of the main ways of achieving this goal is to find out if and how their environment offers opportunities for the use of English in out-of-class contexts where interpersonal communication takes place in meaningful conversations. The questions to be answered in this research are: Is English used outside the classroom? If so, what is the nature of these activities and to what extent they contribute in the process of EFL learning?

The main research instrument is a questionnaire consisting of a series of 11 questions whose purpose is to gather data from respondents regarding their outside classroom activities in which English is used. Questions 7 and 9 consist in another 11, respectively 16 items with Likert response scale and question 8 comprises 16 items each with a cumulative or Guttman scale. The last two questions are open-ended in order to provide the opportunity for the students to express in their own words their thoughts concerning this issue. The quantitative questionnaire was chosen as one of the main sources of information for this study in order to get a larger sampling of the target group than would be possible by using only a few interviews. However, follow-up interviews are needed to deepen the findings of this survey. But the starting point of this research was my personal experience as an EFL teacher. In the case of this study, the central fieldwork was carried out in Hunedoara County, Romania.

3.1. Sources of data and the participants

The Questionnaire was applied to 20 high school learners during September-November 2016. These students are 11th graders in a philology class that uses an advanced course book and they have three English classes/hours per week. The four general competencies targeted by the CEF for this category of learners are: understanding oral and written in various communication situations, production of oral and written messages adequate to context, interaction in oral and written communication and the transfer and mediation of oral and written messages in various communication situations. From the general competencies are derived specific competencies targeting a school year, such as, identification of main ideas in a clearly structured complex oral message on a given topic. The first section of the questionnaire applied to this group of EFL learners includes personal information meant to reveal the sociological background of the informants, including age, parents' occupation and education, and learners' perceived proficiency in English. Questions in the second section were aimed at identifying the respondents' attitude to use and learn of English outside the classroom, if they have

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opportunities to communicate in this language and to what extent these situations help EFL learning.

While handing out the questionnaire I emphasized the importance of answering the questions individually, without the help of their classmates, relatives or friends, in order to keep the answers as genuine as possible for each of them. The questionnaire and all the explanations were given in English, and I was ready to translate the unclear questions for those with poor proficiency of English. The questionnaire provides plenty of fruitful research material with insights on what activities from outside the classroom environment imply use of English and the relationship between EFL and social aspects of daily life as they are perceived by the target group.

3.2. Analysis of data

The English learners group is represented by high school students whose average age is seventeen. The great majority of their parents have graduated high school, only three mothers and one father from among their parents are academic majors. Their answers revel that a quarter of respondents use English every day or almost every day, a similar proportion use it weekly and the remainder use it rarely. Only one student does not use English outside the classroom excepting English homework. With this amount and frequency of EFL usage it is worth to pay a closer attention to those situations and assess their contribution to the learning process.

The school years with English as a subject for this group of learners varies from six to eleven years and as perceived by themselves, their level of English at present is good for a third of the group, very good for 30% and sufficient for another 20%. The others consider their English to be poor and these are the same respondents who learn English only to pass the compulsory exams. From my point of view, being their English teacher, the general level of students in this class ranks among sufficient and good for the great majority. However, more students from this group could be better at English if they were motivated to improve their English and consequently if they used all the opportunities offered by their context to improve their English language, instead of relying only on EFL classroom activities.

Most of the students in this class consider that learning English is important for their future and some of them would like to study at a university abroad if they had a chance and to get a job at an international or global company. This evinces that learning English offers these students new perspectives and widens their future horizons. Not only in Romania EFL learners regard the situation like this, but at a European level “English is, again, perceived to be the most useful language. More than three quarters (79%) of Europeans think it an important language for children to learn, slightly higher than the proportion believing it important for their personal development (67%). Again, it is much more likely than any other language to be considered useful for a child’s future” (Europeans and their Languages 2012, 75). In

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both cases, motivation for learning affects the outcomes. The poor ones learn it only from compulsory reasons because they do not see the importance and opportunities that speaking English brings to them. Nunan's (1991) studies on successful language learners from different language leaning backgrounds and from a variety of contexts concludes that "despite the diverse contexts and environments in which the subjects learnt English, practically all agreed that formal classroom interaction was insufficient. Motivation, a preparedness to take risks, and the determination to apply their developing language skills outside the classroom characterized most of the responses" (175).

The importance of the motivation "from within" (Deci and Flaste, 1996, 10), also known as intrinsic motivation is "doing something as an end in itself, for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment, interest, challenge, or skill and knowledge development.... not only promotes spontaneous learning behavior and has a powerful self-sustaining dynamic but also leads to a qualitatively different and more effective kind of learning than extrinsic forms of motivation." (Ushioda 2008, 21) According to Ehrman et al., intrinsic motivation not only comes from within, but it is also related to the identity of the individual and it is manifested when the learning is a goal in itself for the student (Ehrman et al. 2003, 320). The extrinsic motivation is promoted by external factors such as earning a reward, getting a good grade or avoiding punishment. Learning for some of the students of this group takes place in order to get such external rewards. In this category of factors can be included interaction with parents, teachers, friends and influences from a wider social context such as cultural norms, societal attitudes and expectations. All these factors can be either a motivator for the learner or they can demotivate. Most frequent the motivation for EFL is a combination of these two types of motivation. Even if it is considered that the intrinsic motivation is the optimal form of learning due to its self-sustaining dynamic, Ushioda (2008) argues that "we should not lightly dismiss extrinsic motivation as inherently less effective and less desirable. In many educational contexts, certain types of extrinsic goal are indeed positively valued" (Ushioda cf. Griffiths 2008, 22). Not only academic success, but also career and life ambitions of these learners constitute a strong enough reason for them to learn English. If the level of motivation varies from a learner to another, in the following section are examined what are the social life opportunities to use EFL.

From the debut of Myspace in 2003 as the first social media the communication arena has changed over the last decade in an unprecedented manner in most countries of the world. The widespread of the next social media applications Facebook 2004, YouTube 2005 and Twitter 2006 has also enlarged greatly the number of users of this new and already became common use of socialization. A decade earlier, before these means of online communication existed, the only possibility for EFL learners to communicate with native speakers was the telephone conversation. But now a considerable amount of English use takes place when these

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young learners are playing computer games on the one side and writing emails, sms, chat, other messages and writing project works. It was also remarked by the European study that "the most notable changes since 2005 are an increase in the proportion of Europeans who regularly use foreign languages on the internet (+10 percentage points) and when watching films/television or listening to the radio (+8 points)" (Europeans and their Languages 7). As outlined in Figure 1, the activities with the greatest preponderance for the use of English outside the classroom are enjoying programs such as TV, internet, radio followed by communicating with other EFL speakers, or/and with native speakers of English. Due to the reduced number of native speakers in their town for face-to-face interactions, most of the communication is either online or in ELF situations.

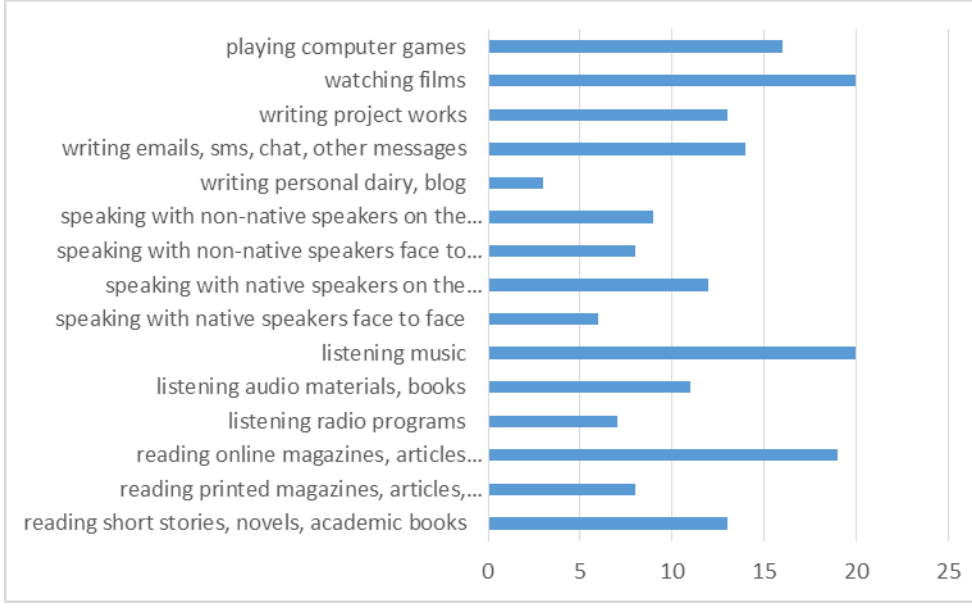


Figure 1. Activities in which English is used outside the classroom

The most favorite activities with 100% in their preference is listening to music and watching films, followed by reading online materials with 90%. If most of the students read English magazines, newspapers, and novels for entertainment, hitherto only 10% read professional and academic materials in English. This could be explained by their lower interest in scientific materials, but also by the availability and the leisure aspect of the first category (see Figure 1).

Students' evaluation of the activities that improved their BICS according to Figure 2 shows the two skills with prevalence in their answers are the receptive ones, listening and reading, improvements consisting in learning the pronunciation

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of some words and understanding native or fast speakers. For most of the respondents, reading helped to improve their general knowledge and enrich their vocabulary. It was also stated that reading activities helped to have a new point of view. Speaking is the first productive skill that seems to be improved by out-of-class activities helping the learners to speak fluently, to overcome the fear of speaking English and then to be able to speak with a native speaker. Also, great opportunities for meaningful speaking takes place when these students are given a five-minute talking time during English class to discuss with their desk mate about yesterday's activities when English was used.

Writing progress consists in reducing the number of grammatical errors and to avoid spelling mistakes because writing just takes place and obviously in these contexts students are not under the pressure of grammatical restraints. However, they do not feel writing outside the classroom helps them in writing in an organized way.

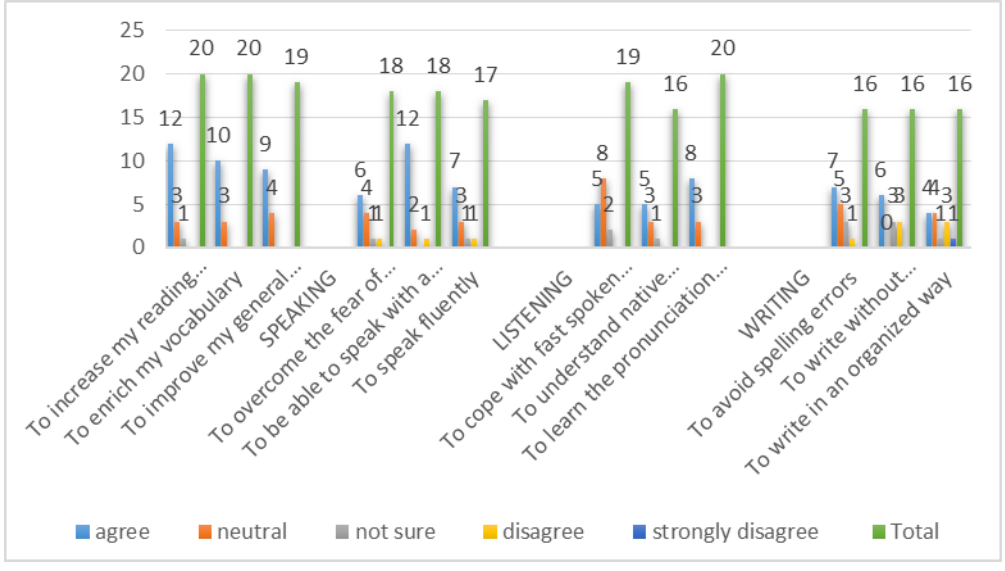


Figure 2. English Proficiency Improved

Data provided by this figure brings us the reality that informal social networks of these young learners provide support and positive models for use of EFL in out-of-class contexts helping in different degrees to reach their educational potential. Teachers should not only acknowledge these opportunities but also "drawing on these resources, and using them to develop more flexible systems of provision for individual students, is one of the primary routes to raising achievement and equipping young people for the challenges and opportunities of adult life" (Bentley

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1998, 73-74). There is only one year before these learners become adults and they should be concerned not only for their English Linguistic Competences exam but also for BICS as they need further in life.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out if and how the environment of EFL learners from Romania provides opportunities for the use of English in out-of-class contexts where interpersonal communication takes place in meaningful conversations. The questions to be answered in this research were meant to identify if English is used outside the classroom. If so, what is the nature of these activities and to what extent do they help EFL learning?

Despite the reduced scale of this study, it has resulted in intriguing findings intended to be complementary tools for the formal education. Teachers concerned with the EFL learners' progress from the Expanding Circle where opportunities for the use of English in daily life are reduced need to pay closer attention to these aspects and value them as much as possible. The goal of EFL teacher is to encourage language learners to become more communicatively competent and to facilitate interaction in target language.

Analyzing the contexts that twenty first century's society creates in the environment of the young learners from Romania, they can spend considerable time using English on their own, listening to plenty of English material which helps them greatly improve their understanding of native speakers and also cope with fast messages. Although most of the reading takes place in a leisure manner, it was proved that it enriches students' vocabulary and improves their knowledge. The productive skills are also affected.

After evaluating the out-of-class contexts that facilitate BICS development from the Romanian linguistic landscape, it can be said that EFL learners are supported in their learning by all the activities that imply using of English on their own.

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