

10 Learning Environments and Learner Participation in ELT

Fatma Mahad Al-Mashani
Dhofar Region

1 INTRODUCTION

“Teacher, how many lessons are there before we can go home?”. In my experience in Omani primary schools, I have been hearing the same utterance above, every day and every where, from learners in all grades. Teachers of other subjects tell me they hear this question very often too. In English lessons I notice that many learners lack the interest to participate. My aim in this study is to examine this general lack of motivation to learn in relation to the environment in which it is meant to take place. The classrooms I work in, for example, are small compared to the number of learners and in relation to the kinds of interactive activities which the curriculum and L2 acquisition theories encourage us to use to promote language learning. I would like to create a new learning environment for my learners and to examine what impact this has on their motivation to learn.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature specifically on the learning environment in L2 contexts does not seem to be plentiful. Here, therefore, I will focus on issues in L2 learning which provide a basis for my view that changing the learning environment for learning English in Oman might facilitate learning. These issues are participation and motivation. I will also comment on young learners and their needs.

2.1 Participation

As teachers, we are pleased when we see evidence that our learners are participating in lessons. Participation can be seen in learners’ verbal or written responses to tasks, their concentration, or through their contributions to classroom discourse. Participation can also be gauged from other signals such as when learners pay attention, smile, and raise their hands to answer a teacher’s question. Ur (1996) notes the dangers of boredom in learning languages. She says that it

reflects low motivation, which then influences learners' performance and attitude towards learning. As Lightbown & Spada (1999) indicate, in the teacher's mind the motivated students are those who usually participate actively in the class. My own learners' lack of participation in English lessons was the main reason why I undertook this study.

2.2 Motivation

Ellis (1997) notes the importance of motivation in L2 learning. It influences the degree of effort learners invest in the classroom and can thus have a powerful influence of how much learning takes place. According to Brewster, Ellis & Girard (1991), one of the key roles for the teacher of young learners is to motivate their learners. One of my key goals in this study is to create a learning environment which would make learners more motivated to learn English.

2.3 Young Learners' Instincts

Cameron (2001:9) says that children have a desire to communicate and learn. She adds that young learners can use this powerful desire to support learning if they are engaged in an interesting activity or feel happy. Young learners also need particular attention not just from the teacher but from the school generally. It needs to be acknowledged that young learners learn in particular ways and that these may be different to the ways in which older children learn. Children may also not be motivated to learn another language in the way that older learners might be (Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 1991).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question was: To what extent does changing the learning environment encourage my pupils in Grade 4 to participate and develop their vocabulary in English language lessons? Sub-questions I addressed were:

1. How do my students participate in their normal classrooms?
2. Do they participate better in different environments?
3. Do they retain vocabulary more successfully if we change the learning environment?

3.2 An Experimental approach

This study used an experimental approach. It was not experimental in the sense of tightly controlled variables but in the sense that different treatments were applied to two groups and the effects of these compared via a post-test. I now describe the stages of this experiment.

3.2.1 Stage 1

The participants in this study were two of my Grade 4 classes (4/4 and 4/5). The learners were 8-9 years old. In the first stage of the study I taught class 4/5 in the usual classroom environment. The material covered was Lessons 1 and 2 from Unit

2 of our coursebook, English for Me Grade 4. The topic of these lessons was parts of a computer. On the same day I taught the same material to class 4/4, except that this lesson was taught in the learning resources centre (a room in the school equipped with computers and other learning resources). To help with the analysis of the two classes, I designed a rating scale focusing on learners' behaviours, interest, motivation, and participation and asked some colleagues to complete the rating scale while observing the two lessons. After the first lesson, though, my colleagues said they were finding it hard to use my rating scale so for the second lesson they observed I just asked them to make notes about the issues I was interested in (participation and motivation). They then passed their notes to me.

3.2.2 Stage 2

In the second stage of the study, I once again taught both classes the same lesson. This time it was Unit 6, Lesson 4, which was about the environment. I taught class 4/5 in the classroom but took 4/4 to a park and had the lesson there. I relied on my own observations to analyze the extent to which learners participated and were motivated as well as those of the senior teacher of English in our school, who accompanied me to the park.

3.2.3 The Test

To examine the impact of the learning environment on learning, I focused on testing the vocabulary learned in the lessons from Units 2 and 6 which I taught. I designed two listening tests to assess learners' knowledge of the vocabulary. The first test was given to both groups at the end of Unit 2, which was about computers. There were six pictures in the test. The pupils had to listen to the teacher reading a text and write numbers next to the pictures according to the order in which they were mentioned in the text (the first answer was provided as an example). The second test was administered to both groups after Unit 6. In this case, they had to listen to the teacher who read out a series of instructions (e.g. don't leave water running) and to write down a matching number beneath each picture on the test sheet.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Student Participation in the Classroom

Here I discuss the two classes held in the normal classroom. These comments come from my observations and from the notes of those colleagues who observed these lessons. The learners studied the lesson as usual. I noticed some pupils were talking with each other. Many of them were very good, and motivated to participate during the interaction. There were others who were playing with caps, looking through the windows and drawing on their desks. In class 4/5, pupils' performance was good but there was room for improvement in their levels of attention and enthusiasm. In class 4/4 some students seemed uninterested in the lesson. These were students who were generally considered to be of a lower ability, not just in English but in other subjects too.

4.2 Student Participation Outside the Classroom

The data were gathered through observation, with the cooperation of my colleagues and the senior teacher. According to my notes in the learning centre (class 4/4), there was a huge difference between their performance in the classroom and the changed environment. I still remember one student, who was the weakest participant in that class, when he was focusing, smiling, and trying to raise his hand during the lesson on computer parts. All students were in fact very motivated to point to and touch the real computers. They moved around the large room, practising the vocabulary e.g. a screen, a printer, a mouse, etc.

Furthermore, the normally very noisy pupils were showing more curiosity to discover things, looking at the book shelves, and pointing to the pictures above them. Also, I found my learners were keeping eye contact with me. A very noticeable feature of this lesson was learners' attention, which they maintained until the end of the period. When I discussed the lesson in the learning resource centre with the colleagues who observed me they said they were shocked that many students were showing a completely different potential in their learning. For instance, they noticed that two students called Mohammed and Salim were participating and connecting with lesson events. In the normal classroom, these two students rarely showed any interest.

The lesson in the park was also characterized by higher than normal levels of learner participation. The learners were smiling, moving actively when they responded to my commands and performing real life actions. The students seemed motivated too and even the weaker students tried their best and showed interest throughout the lesson.

4.3 Vocabulary Retention

I compared the test scores of 18 learners in each class (six good pupils, six average, and six weak), once after Unit 2 and again after Unit 6 (a different listening test was used in each case). Table 1 shows the results for the computer parts lesson; in this case class 4/4 were in the learning centre and class 4/5 in the classroom. The maximum possible score on the test was 6.

Table 1: Unit 2 test scores for both groups

	Class 4/4 (in learning centre)			Class 4/5 (in classroom)		
	Good Ps	Average Ps	Weak Ps	Good Ps	Average Ps	Weak Ps
	6	0	1	6	4	1
	6	6	2	2	2	0
	6	6	1	6	6	0
	6	4	0	6	4	1
	6	3	2	4	3	0
	6	3	0	6	4	0
Total	36	22	6	30	23	2
Average	6.0	3.7	1.0	5.0	3.8	0.3

These results show that, overall, the average score for the group in the learning centre was 3.6 while that for the normal classroom was 3.1. In terms of the sub-groups of learners, both good and weak learners in class 4/4 performed better than the parallel groups in 4/5.

Table 2 shows the results for the second test, conducted after Unit 6. In this case class 4/5 were in the learning centre and class 4/4 in the classroom. The maximum score on this test was 7.

Table 2: Unit 6 test scores for both groups

	Class 4/4 (in classroom)			Class 4/5 (in park)		
	Good Ps	Average Ps	Weak Ps	Good Ps	Average Ps	Weak Ps
	7	4	1	7	5	3
	7	3	1	7	1	4
	4	2	2	7	4	5
	7	5	1	7	5	0
	4	5	4	7	4	0
	4	3	2	7	3	3
Total	33	22	11	42	22	15
Average	5.5	3.7	1.8	7.0	3.7	2.5

The overall mean score for the group in the classroom was in this case 3.7 while for the class in the park it was 4.4. Once again the good and weak sub-groups in the park group did better than their equivalents in the classroom.

Overall, then, there is evidence here that groups taught outside of the normal classroom performed better on a vocabulary test than those who were taught the same material in the normal classroom setting. The average learners seemed to be less affected by the change of environment though than the good and weak learners were.

5 DISCUSSION

The observation data provided evidence of the effectiveness of the learning centre and the park, in terms of increasing learners' motivation and interest. It was clear that when the learners were working in these environments they paid more attention, participated more willingly in the lesson, and generally seemed to enjoy themselves more. The learning resource centre provided learners with space to move about and many real objects related to the lesson to see and touch. In the park, the learners also had ample space to move around; this setting also allowed them to engage in real activities related to the theme of the lesson, such as putting rubbish in bins and taking care of flowers. Both the park and the learning centre created meaningful contexts for language use; Johnson (1995) says that such contexts aid comprehension and promote L2 learning.

The test scores provided evidence that changing the learning environment could have a positive effect on learners' performance, with a specific focus here on

recalling vocabulary taught in the lessons examined here. Overall, on both occasions, learners who did their lessons out of the classroom performed better on the vocabulary test than those who did their lessons in the classroom.

5.1 Limitations

It is of course not realistic to expect every lesson to be conducted outside of the normal classroom; taking learners to the park, for example, involves many logistical arrangements (e.g. transport) which in this study I had to arrange personally. So I am not suggesting that classrooms should not be used but that occasionally varying the learning environment can have a positive effect on learners and learning. Other limitations that must be acknowledged here are the simple nature of the vocabulary tests I used and the variable nature of the observational data I was able to collect (as noted above, my initial attempts to get my colleagues to use a structured observation sheet were not successful). One final point to note here is that my own beliefs about the value of learning outside the classroom may have influenced the results of this study; in other words I have may have unconsciously worked harder during the outside classroom lessons and this may be why the learners performed better on the tests after these lessons.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has given me the confidence to continue exploring ways of creating alternative environments for the learning of English. The classroom will always remain the main location for schooling, but there are other possibilities which can be considered and these are often available in the school itself. And where taking children out of the classroom is problematic, there is also the possibility of transforming the environment of the classroom itself – turning the classroom itself into a park or some other environment. This too is likely to motivate learners, increase their participation in the lesson, and support their learning of English.

REFERENCES

- Brewster, J., Ellis, G. & Girard, D. (1991). *The primary English teacher's guide*. London: Penguin.
- Brumfit, C., Moon, J. & Tongue, R. (Eds.) (1991). *Teaching English to children*. Harlow: Longman.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, K. (1995). *Understanding communication in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.