January 2012

Integration of learning spaces and modes in the ELT class: A case inquiry paper

Mariam Farooq
Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck

Recommended Citation
Integration of Learning Spaces and Modes in the ELT Class
A Case Inquiry Paper

Mariam Farooq
email: mariam.farooq@aku.edu

Introduction

New ways of viewing learning and the development of technology challenge us to think of learning spaces in a different way (Sieg, Zottmann, Kaplan, & Fischer, 2010). The classroom and other areas of the school are advised to be flexible and arranged in a way to promote efficient learning for the students. We need to move from the traditional classroom teaching and incorporate other areas (spaces) into our teaching curriculum. Learning in different environments involves different types of learning, for different purposes and the learning levels may also vary (Edwards & Biesta & Thorpe, 2009). As teacher educators, we should try and mobilize learning across different strata while incorporating a variety of modes into our teaching lessons to provide our students a positive and effective learning environment.

This inquiry paper aims at exploring the concepts of learning spaces and multimodality while employing design experiments model in order to understand learning systems in English Language Teaching (ELT).

Design Experiments Model

The term ‘design experiments’ or ‘design research’ was introduced by Ann Brown in 1992. The design’s main aim was to test and refine educational designs based on principles derived from prior research (Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004). It involved learning phenomena to take place in the real world. This paper employs design experiments model while focusing on the relationship between learning spaces and different modes. However, only some elements of the design are implemented in the lesson due to the time constraint this study had. See the inquiry process in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: The Inquiry Process](image-url)
Information Collection

Data Collection Tools

Data collection was performed by conducting a survey of the school, observing, interviewing the English Language teacher/students and via reflection. The basic aim of this survey was to put together vital information in order to identify and address important issues/strengths within the ELT system.

Survey

A survey of the school and ELT class was conducted to note the way various spaces and modes that were being incorporated into the ELT lesson. The survey also helped gain important information on the relationship between the school’s management and the ELT teacher.

Observations

A lesson delivered by the ELT teacher was observed in order to note the learning spaces and modes that were being used. This also further helped me in designing my own lessons.

Interviews

Interviews with the ELT teacher and students were carried out to gain an in-depth understanding of the way story writing lessons were being conducted in the class by the teacher and to understand students’ perceptions on the use of different technology and spaces (if any).

Reflection

Reflections were written on the observations that were being carried out during the study so that further improvement could be suggested.

Brief Description of the School

In an attempt to shed light on a learning system, this study selected a co-educational English medium school located in Karachi. The chosen school was a three-storey bungalow turned into a private school that served approximately 100 students with seven teachers. The school’s aim was to provide a safe learning environment to all its students. The building structure had been divided into four main parts. The ground floor featured the principal’s office and other classrooms used for Mathematics and English teaching. The classrooms for Science and Urdu were located on the first floor in addition to a library and laboratory. The second floor contained a classroom, a corridor turned into a multimedia room and a terrace. The school’s outdoor area (garage parking) was used for physical education activities with the area to the side of the entrance used for table tennis. The school management had utilised small spaces well, while keeping them functional and supportive for students’ learning.

The Process Enneagram

Process Enneagram talks about organisations as a living system where, “all the parts are connected, constantly interacting and adapting to changes in the environment in ways that maintain their identity and sustainability” (Knowles, 2006, p.2). The Process Enneagram was used in understanding the ELT class as one component of the school system. The class got its identity from the English teacher and students present in the classroom. The teacher’s role was to facilitate, help and solve problems while the students were viewed as learners of English language. The teacher’s intention was to make her students proficient in English language while the management wanted good results from the students. The teacher followed the syllabus to achieve goals and aims set by the
management. Any problems/issues that the teacher/students faced during the learning process were managed by the higher authority (bigger system owns its components). This showed a positive working relationship between the students-teacher-management. The management also offered professional development courses to its teachers to make them more competent in their subject areas.

However, the rules set by the management exerted a powerful influence on the way teaching staff worked together. The hidden powerful forces played a major role in the management’s efforts to maintain stability, reliability, predictability and control (Knowles, 2006). The teaching staff followed the management and was in coherence with it. This helped the organisation (school) to grow and learn. Objectives were met by following a weekly planner/lesson plan set by the management. Upon interviewing the English teacher I learnt that she makes information available to her students via lectures/textbook and assesses their learning through tests and class work. The teacher was supposed to be a source of motivation for the students through incorporating different strategies to teach English. As the students learnt, they were able to apply their skills/knowledge to other subjects as well. For example: students could apply English (features of writing skills) in their Science class (to describe XYZ). All of this made the ELT class as one important component of the bigger system (school).

**Identification of Issues in the ELT Class**

The language teacher in the class was viewed as an important component of the system. The school had a shortage of English teachers with only one English language teacher teaching all five grades (2-6). The English teacher herself was an A-level student with a one year teaching experience. On observing her class, I found that she was teaching grammar concepts in a very traditional manner by using the whiteboard and textbook as the only resources for her teaching. It was a teacher-centered class with the teacher playing an active role and making all the decisions. Reflecting on the interview with her, the teacher seemed to be under pressure to cover the syllabus within the given time period and as a result was not prepared to take a risk for change. She further blamed the system for being commanding and pressurising her being the only English language teacher in the school to follow the rules set by the management. She herself did not use any space other than the classroom for her lessons (no time and energy), although she acknowledged the importance and benefits of integrating other spaces and modes into her teaching lessons.

The furniture in the classroom was very closely packed with students’ bags placed on their chairs (this limited students’ movement in the class). Although the furniture was light and movable, the students were not allowed to move around or conduct any group discussion. As a result, only pair-work tasks were being carried out in the classroom. The atmosphere in the classroom was dull with the walls and soft boards being neglected (not used). All of this made me come to the conclusion that there was a gap between what the teacher wanted to incorporate in her lesson and what was physically available.

**Design of Teaching and Learning**

The main aim of the design was to show the school’s principal and the language teacher how learning spaces and different modes could be re-designed and integrated into the teaching to enhance students’ learning. For that, I decided to orient and equip the ELT teacher (observer/learner) with the necessary skills required to integrate different spaces/modes as an intervention, with the hope that this would become a phenomenon to be introduced in the school system. However, it was only my
aspiration and not yet a proven claim (it might/ might not have happened) as it depended a lot on the school’s management and teacher’s pro-activity.

Development and Planning

Lesson One and Lesson Two

The two lesson plans were developed by incorporating student learning outcomes (SLO’s) from the National Curriculum (NC) for English Language (2006). The curriculum framework for writing skills (competency two) assisted in designing the lessons to make students write narrative stories by using the elements of story writing (beginning, middle and end).

The first lesson plan was developed to familiarize students with the structure of story writing and for that an oral and a written example of story writing was planned using pictures to develop thought patterns in students. The second lesson was designed to start with a presentation a recap from the previous lesson to refresh students’ memory followed by a group task and a poster presentation on story writing. This would make students learn to work in groups, share ideas with each other and value/appreciate other group’s work. While designing the lessons it was a challenge to make use of different modes at a given moment and in a specific environment. An alternate plan was developed combined with strategies to deal with any anticipated problems.

Learning Spaces and Multimodality

The corridor, classroom and terrace were used to try and remake the connections and boundaries of different spaces of learning (Edwards, Biesta, Thorpe, 2009). These areas were also used to make transitions between activities easier and more efficient. The corridor was used to initiate the lesson with the board work on story writing, although initially, it was planned to use that space for the recap of the presentation. The corridor was spacious enough to accommodate the three classes which had to be merged for the lesson. Therefore, it was decided to use the corridor for the first part of the lesson as well. Besides that students also used the corridor during their group task by spreading themselves out and using the mats, chairs, benches and the floor as their working area/ space. There was a very relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere in the room as students were not bound by any space constraint. At the end, the group members displayed their story posters on the walls of the corridor. The corridor then became a gallery walk for the students (a mode of active engagement) where students were able to view and discuss each other’s group work. This also fostered higher order thinking skills and further promoted class discussion.
Classroom (formal space) and the terrace area (extended-informal space) were used to give freedom to the students, for them to spread out and work in groups. I wanted the students to have their own space and privacy for the oral discussion that required active listening and sharing of each other's ideas/knowledge. This helped students to concentrate better, have an opportunity for cross-age tutoring and be in a position to listen and appreciate each other's work/contribution with respect. There was a very pleasant environment where clever students were helping the weaker ones in the class. Even my movement and interaction with the students (during the group work) contributed to the lesson. I got an opportunity to check students' knowledge on story writing and helped them by asking them challenging questions to clear any misconceptions. My role was more of a facilitator and supporter due to the student-centered learning that took place during the lesson.

Students working in groups in the corridor

Group discussion in the classroom

Terrace Area
Due to the space limitation of the school, it was decided to add an element of local context into the design of the lesson. Pictures of local places (mosque, airport, park, and beach) were used to give students a platform to develop their stories on, something students could relate to and use their prior knowledge, experiences, and interests. The pictures triggered students’ imagination and power of visualization, which helped them in bringing their writing alive.

According to Jewitt, 2006, Multimodality is realised as a multilayered network of interlinking connections across semiotic modes which are all present in the multiple materialities of the object and process. Multiple modes that were incorporated into the design of the lesson were: soft board (displayed pictures for story telling-visual mode), whiteboard (written text), presentation (technology), pictures (visual mode) worksheets (written text), display of students work (visual and written text) / poster presentation/story telling (speech/verbal mode). Every effort was made to make sure that all the resources were of low cost or already presented/available in the school.

The soft board was one of the boundary objects in the corridor that was being ignored. Value was added to it via a transformation by sticking pictures on it for the story writing part. Therefore, the soft board in the class was adapted to a local need for the story writing lesson and became part of the teaching curriculum (Edwards et al. 2009).
The whiteboard (boundary object) and worksheets assisted students in providing the structure of the story scaffolding devices. The whiteboard was used in helping students to become familiar with the structure of writing (organisation and categorisation of ideas). Worksheets also helped students to jot down their ideas/story line in rough before the final writing on the poster. It also gave students a chance to proof read their story (check/correct spellings mistakes). Moreover, the story written down on chart paper also had elements of multimodality (visual form as well as written text/language). Poster presentation was done at the end to raise students’ confidence level, where they felt accepted and appreciated for their written work. The walls of the corridor were used for that purpose. All of this demonstrated how different modes could contribute to learning and pedagogy.

**Implementation of the Design**

**Shifts and Changes**

The implementation of the design is often affected by actions of the participants (lethal mutations). This happens when the intended design is changed and is different from the enacted design while taking participants’ needs, interests, abilities, interactions and goals into account’ (Collins, Joseph, Bielaczyck, 2004). The participants can be students, teachers or the management of the school. In my case, the school principal had some reservations with the time the two lessons were going to take on two separate days and close to exams. As a result he asked me to merge the two lessons together and conduct one lesson on the first day of teaching. In addition to this, he also wanted to involve Grade five and six students for the story writing lesson to have a maximum number of students to benefit from the story writing task.

All of this resulted in a few changes in the intended plan. By merging the two lessons together, I decided not to display the presentation on story writing as no recap was required because the structure of story writing was still fresh in students’ minds. Therefore, the presentation element from the design was not implemented on the day of teaching.

By combining the three grades together, the venue for the lesson also had to be changed from the classroom to the corridor. The classroom was too small to accommodate all the students and as a solution, the corridor being more spacious and airy was decided to be used for the lesson. However, the corridor area was not arranged for the story writing lesson. It only had multimedia in it. I called the assistant teacher and expressed my concern regarding the whiteboard that was needed for the first part of the lesson. With the help of her we took out a whiteboard from the store room and positioned it on top of two chairs to raise its height.

Furthermore, the students felt shy and were hesitant to come in front of the class and present their story. I then made them come in front of the class as a group which gave them an opportunity to help and support each other at any part of the story being missed by the group member. The students were also made to give their group a name which provided a sense of identity/belonging to the group. This raised the motivational level and the students were able to tell the story more confidently in their groups.
Findings

Feedback from the workshop was taken by interviewing the students, asking the teacher to fill in the observation sheet, looking at students writing samples and incorporating my own reflection on the workshop. The basic aim of these findings was to see how successful the lesson was with the aim of providing different learning opportunities to the students by integrating spaces and modes into the story writing lesson. Some elements of the design were implemented more or less the way I had intended while a few elements were changed or not implemented at all to fit the circumstances (e.g. presentation). Students’ writing samples demonstrated that they were able to develop interesting stories by using the elements of story writing. The students also found group work/poster presentation fruitful and gave them freedom to share ideas with each other and present their work for others to learn from. The teacher (observer) in the class also managed to pick important information regarding the usage of different modes and spaces. The lesson plan was discussed with her prior to the lesson to brief/guide her on the importance of using different resources/spaces; it also helped her to focus more on certain aspects of the lesson. Overall, I was able to achieve my aim while successfully re-designing the changes (shifts) that took place during the lesson.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As a course of action, a role play of the story writing could be incorporated to internalise the knowledge and skills in students. It can be used as the next step involving movements, gestures and spoken dialogues in the design of the lesson.

One element that I missed incorporating in the design during the planning phase was to make use of the terrace area purposefully. The terrace was used in providing extra space for accommodating the students, whereas it could have been designed in a way to allow students in exploring the surrounding area of the terrace, pick up something from that particular context and then use those elements for the story writing task. This would have then served the purpose of using the terrace as a proper learning space.

It can be concluded that integration of learning spaces and different modes is vital for language learning as it gives exposure to students to make new meanings from new environments or modes. For this, the design experiment’s model allowed undertaking a survey of the school to address the issues/ strengths in the ELT setting. It also directed me to move out from a normal classroom setting (formal space) and incorporate other spaces into the design, bridging the gap
between formal and informal spaces. With that, the importance of multimodality also came into effect that allows for a richer and deeper understanding of the students to take place.

References


