3.1.2 Our learners

Transcript

Slide 1

Welcome to this sub-section, which focuses on **learners** in the classroom.

Slide 2

In this sub-section, we invite you to reflect on who the students in your classroom are as learners of English. You may know your class quite well, even though it may consist of many different individuals. And as a teacher of the school subject English, you are sure to have a good idea of what kinds of activities and tasks you use in your English lessons. It is possible, however, that you don't have an equally clear picture of how and how much your students use English <u>outside the classroom</u>. Depending on their age and experience with English, they are possibly not just learners, but already **users** of English.

The main reason why this course has a whole sub-section about English language learners is that once we recognize that many students are able to use English to communicate with people in different situations in real life outside of school, we will be in a better position to make use of and build on these insights <u>inside the classroom</u>, too. You will also have a better chance to build a powerful relationship with your students, which in turn will facilitate both their language learning process and their identity construction as confident users of English.

Slide 3

In this first activity, we ask you to reflect on how you <u>think</u> your learners make use of English. In order to get the best overview of the real state of affairs, you need to ask the students themselves. Of course, if you teach English in the early years of primary school, your students will not be in a position to use it on many arenas, due to their limited knowledge of the language. And they may not even be able to state explicitly how, where, and how often they use English. You may have to prompt them. At this stage, however, we would like <u>you</u> to have a good think. To get you started, we have supplied a series of statements for you to consider. This is a true/false type of activity. Your job is to tick the statements you think are true about your learners' use of English.

Later, you will have the opportunity to find out whether your thoughts here at the beginning of this module in fact match what your learners say themselves.

Slide 4

A lot of research has by now gone into the field of English language teaching (ELT). If you have studied the sub-section called "Instructional Context," you will know something about the topic and policies behind various approaches to teaching English. Researchers have also studied different aspects of multilingualism, as a feature of society, and as it affects individuals. With increasing globalization and forced or voluntary migration, many learners learn to understand and use more languages than the one(s) they grew up with in their families.

In the following four slides, we take you through a few concepts that are relevant to a characterization of the central actors in your classroom, your learners. The first one has to do with their status and role as language learners and language users. Since English is used on so many arenas in society, your language learners are most likely both:

- **EFL learners**
  and
- **ELF users**

In the classroom, they meet English as a school subject. This is often defined and taught as a foreign language, even though it does not appear so "foreign" to most students any more. And, since even very young learners encounter English so often as a contact language when they travel and since they meet it through the media, they probably use the language themselves outside the classroom, too.

There is an important difference between being a **learner** of a language which is different from the language you speak at home and being a **user** of a language. In this part of the course, we will study some of the implications this difference may have. We find it important to be aware of this double role and often prefer to refer to students as **learner-users** in the following.

Slide 5

Extramural English is a term introduced by Pia Sundqvist in her doctoral work in 2009. More and more English educationalists felt the need to know more about learners' actual use of English outside the classroom context. Schoolwork is most often set up by the teacher with texts, activities and tasks that are linked to the textbook chosen by the school. At the same time, many learners demonstrate an English proficiency that can't come from schoolwork alone, and in fact many students state themselves that they learn more from outside the classroom.

In other words, they **use** English **voluntarily** outside the classroom walls and learn a lot from it. Depending on their experience and capacity, they listen to,

speak, read, and write English in different communicative situations and for different purposes. The aim of this use of English is a pragmatic one. The point is not to learn English as such. English is simply used as a practical contact language – as **ELF** – between people who do not know each other's first languages.

Some obvious extramural contexts are gaming, interaction through social media, online music, films, videos, and other types of text via the Internet. With the growing use of digital channels of communication, this is how many young people interact using English. In addition, extramural English applies also in off-line situations.

Slide 6

The third key term is **Emergent multilinguals**. It is important to be aware of language learning and use as dynamic processes. These processes started as soon as we were surrounded by language from birth (and before, probably). We tend to think about languages as belonging to different countries. For instance, most people who live in Norway speak Norwegian in one way or another. When Norwegian students start learning English at school, we think of this as another language. It may be more useful for us to realize that students are already in the process of developing into multilinguals, and that the languages they know are all parts of **one** underlying language competence. Calling on and building on learners' awareness of their multilingualism is likely to benefit their language learning and identity construction.

As we shall see later, it is normal to mix the languages you know. This phenomenon is called **translanguaging**. We shall come back to translanguaging as a strategy later.

Slide 7

Our fourth term is **learner multicompetence**. The concept of 'multicompetence' was introduced by Vivian Cook at the beginning of this century. Later, the term has been adopted by many researchers and language pedagogues. It aligns well with the concept 'common underlying proficiency' launched by Jim Cummins at the same time. There was a need to explicitly call attention to the fact that languages are not stored as separate systems in language users' brains. Rather, like an iceberg, what is below the water surface is the integrated language competence, and what is known as named languages can be visualized as the ice formations above the water level.

This multicompetence is constantly undergoing change, as new words and patterns are added, and others lost in the course of our lives. It is dynamic, in other words. Our multicompetence contains various linguistic and other meaning-making resources. Together, they all form part of our linguistic

repertoire, which we call on when we communicate and interact with other people. It is only natural, then, that we sometimes choose to use words and phrases that belong to another named language that we know and know that our communication partner knows when we speak English, for instance.

Slide 8

In order to give all learners the best opportunities for language learning, it is vital that you as their teacher know as much as possible about your learners' emergent multicompetence. In order to find out how they perceive of their own language identities, their language egos, Activity 2 is meant to help you elicit this awareness. It is important to make sure they all include English as well as their home language and the language of schooling if these are different. Any other languages they relate to will be part of the mix as well. It does not matter how they choose to visualize their languages and where they would put the different ones on or outside the generic body shape.

Needless to say, the information you are able to elicit by organizing this activity is your classroom will be really useful for you when planning effective language tasks and activities for your English class.

Slide 9

Here you get the general instructions for the language portrait activity. The template is available from the main page as a resource. Some students may need more scaffolding to complete their language portraits. You might want to make your own and show it to them as a model to get them started. Make sure to liberally accept many different details. One student once included the home language of a friend, even though this language was not really a part of this student's language repertoire.

Slide 10

In Activity 3 you are invited to reflect on your experience with the language portrait activity. Here we are asking you for a "long answer". This means that you go to the main page and answer the reflective questions we have suggested. It may be a good idea to share this kind of debriefing with your students as well.

Slide 11

As a language teacher, you need to know how to assess the emerging competence of your students. In general, the following components are recognized as central to English language proficiency and therefore often invoked as success criteria for EFL development: **Accuracy, fluency,** and **complexity**. It is worth noting that these are all features of the language itself. **Accuracy** has to do with correctness of form, as regards grammar, vocabulary,

pronunciation (spoken form), punctuation (written form). **Fluency** has to do with how one's language production does not have too many unwanted breaks and pauses. We talk about fluency in connection with reading as well, since the speed when you read depends at least partly on your sight vocabulary and general knowledge of the structure of the language. **Complexity** is a feature that has to do with the length and structure of the sentences you are able to produce and understand. As you go through primary and secondary education, you are expected to master more abstract vocabulary, sentences and texts that have more demanding internal structures.

Of course, ELF users need to know English well enough to be able to make meaning by means of resources of English. But in addition to features of the language itself, ELF users employ different **communication strategies** when they communicate with others who do not know their own first language and who may not be native speakers of English. ELF users are often good at **accommodating** to the one they are interacting with. This means that they are sensitive to the other person's communicative needs. They adjust their speech in order for their interlocutor to understand what they are saying or writing. They also need skills in **negotiating** meaning. This means that they may have to guess what the other person is trying to express, and by asking clarifying questions, for instance, or trying out alternative formulations, they negotiate back and forth until they reach a mutual understanding.

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Strategic communicators make use of different ways of getting their meaning across, and seeking out ways of understanding what they hear or read. As you have seen throughout this course, many people use English as a contact language when other languages are not available to all participants. One way of describing ELF is to say that it is "appropriate use of the resources of English" for different purposes. What do we mean by **appropriate use**? Note that it does not say "accurate use" or even "fluent use". What is important when it comes to ELF usage is that the English used is **effective** and clear enough in a particular situation. When we talk about meaning in use, we often use the term **pragmatic**. Messages need to be pragmatically effective and efficient.

In order to ensure mutual understanding when using ELF, speakers often resort to ways of **simplifying** their message. This can be done by not including what feels like unnecessary grammatical detail. Sometimes single words will do the trick. This is one way of using English appropriately. The speaker is strategically choosing forms that communicate well – and well enough for their purpose.

Another strategic alternative is **translanguaging**. This means making use of different resources that are part of your multicompetence. It may be that you need to produce language really quickly. If you are called on to access words and expressions fast, your working memory may be challenged by the stress of the

situation. Then translanguaging is a useful strategy to use, to win time, and as a way of negotiating meaning. It is a useful communication strategy.

Slide 13

Knowledge, skills, and strategies are all important aspects of language use and language competence. They are cognitive, practical and social in their essence. Other very important aspects of language learning and language use are the **attitudes** learners have to communication in the first place, to language(s) and to English in particular. If English lessons are conducted as typical EFL classes, learners may feel embarrassed at not being able to sound like the native-speaker models they listen to as models through audio materials. Their teacher may also be struggling to adhere to native speaker norms as well. Being reminded of errors and mistakes may discourage learners from using the language in the classroom, and this is a serious situation all the time we know that opportunities for meaningful input and output are essential when it comes to language development. The result may be lack of confidence rather than the opposite, which is what we wish to achieve as teachers.

Stressing errors and distance from native-speaker norms only extends what is often referred to a **deficit orientation** to language development. This means that the focus lies on what you can't manage, what is wrong about your language production, etc. We would like to change this to a truly **resources view** of language use and language learning. One way of encouraging this is by celebrating what learners can actually do with English and the languages they know. A powerful step in the right direction can be to leave out and stop using the term **non-native** altogether when talking about ELF usage. As teachers, we wish to contribute to the development of confident and effective users of English. We don't have to refer to what the students can't do at all.

Slide 14

Do learners need to choose a target model of English? Often the model used as references in textbooks and other teaching materials are Standard English in their British or American form. This implies that these varieties of English are perceived as norms. Should our learners have to choose one of these varieties as their ideal goal? A Norwegian researcher made it her main topic to find out what secondary students themselves thought of British and American target models. Rindal (2013) found that many students in fact did not want to choose one or the other; they wanted to preserve their identity as Norwegian speakers of English. Their aim was to be easily understood, of course, to communicate well.

For learners to be able to trust their language use to be good enough what is needed is a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment. Only then will they be able to make full use of the flexibility of ELF. It is vital to meet learners

with sensitivity. Language learning is not just a matter of learning languages; it is part of their identity construction and development.

Slide 15

Go to Activity 4 on the main page. This activity asks you to select various descriptions of what characterizes the good English language learner and the competent user of ELF. These are the first two parts. The last part (C) requires you to reflect on the relationship between the two roles we have referred to by our term **learner-user**. Answer the questions and express your personal opinion about what it takes to ensure equitable opportunities for all to develop into competent users of English.

Slide 16

If teachers are indeed to be able to assist their learners to the best of their capacity in their process towards context-appropriate English proficiency, their learner knowledge needs to be in place. This is what the activities included in this part of the course are meant to help you obtain. As you can see from the list on this slide, you as a teacher will benefit from knowing that your learners are also real ELF users and what this entails.

Research has shown that multilingual learners often have an enhanced metalingual awareness. This means that they are better than monolinguals at focusing on language form, recognizing different word classes, reflecting on language as an object, and connecting form and meaning.

Slide17

Burke (2009) holds that out-of-school literacy practices, in our case, extramural English reading and writing, should be integrated in school contexts if schooling is to be perceived as relevant and useful. What this means in our situation is allowing students to bridge their dual roles as EFL learners and ELF users. A motivating factor will be the fact that they see their teacher as really interested in their use of English outside the classroom as well as inside it. Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) suggest that a bridging type of activity would be to ask students to bring examples of how they use English extramurally into the classroom so that these texts can be analyzed and discussed as relevant and meaningful English texts. This would be a useful way of allowing the students to engage with language issues and thereby develop their general language awareness in the process. They also need tasks that facilitate authentic communication. Textbooks don't always supply these kinds of language tasks. In general, involving students both in choosing activities and an taking active part in assessment work are steps towards more relevant and meaningful English lessons.

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After having taken up and worked with a number of relevant factors throughout this part of the course, we invite you to turn to Activity 5 on the main page. This is a classroom survey for you to conduct in your own classroom. In addition to serving as a relevant way of summing up your work at this stage, it will also be of use to you when you get to the final assessment of this whole course.

You are of course free to include questions you would like to ask yourself, but we have provided two sets of questions in the model questionnaire on the main page in order to elicit your students' own account of their actual use of English in their lives, and their attitudes to their own ELF usage.

This activity will prepare you well for the last activity, which invites you to share your reflections in a forum discussion. It would of course also be highly relevant to share your thoughts with your own class and refer to their responses in future English lessons.

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The final activity, Activity 6, is your contribution to the forum discussion on the main page. Read through the prompts on this slide and try to respond as fully as you can to all the questions. The last one si particularly relevant, as it focuses on what your contribution to a more ELF-aware pedagogy and practice can be for your emergent multilingual learner-users of English.

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As a way of summing up the content and process of this sub-section devoted to learners, the potential benefit for you as a teacher of English is that it contributes to building your capacity for change when it comes to developing equitable and relevant English instruction for all your learners. Going through the steps and the activities in this part will have enhanced your professional knowledge base as an English teacher in the 21st century. The overall educational context you are a part of is complex, involving many agents and elements that influence each other in various ways. Your learners are particularly important agents. Letting them take an active part, engaging them sensitively at a personal level by taking their attitudes seriously will make their language learning and development richer, deeper, and more motivating.

Thank you!