

3. Learning English

Transcript

Slide 1

In this section, we will discuss the notion of learning and, in particular, learning English. We will first define “learning”, a concept that we all share a deep understanding of, as we’ve been engaged in the process of learning throughout our lives. We will also see how learning English is inextricably linked with using English (as we’ve also pointed out in other sections of this Course). And, we will revisit the impact of teaching on learning, with a particular emphasis on the processes, behaviours and attitudes that are developed and consolidated through schooling.

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Let’s begin with a **definition** of the concept of language learning. It is the grasping, or acquiring, of the knowledge and skills necessary to produce discourse that is meaningful. Anything we do with language is the product, in one way or another, of “learning the ropes” of communication. Knowing the rules, understanding the principles and, to some, extent, experimenting with language and languaging, all these are part and parcel of the process of learning.

As we have seen, learning can take place everywhere and anywhere, at any time and any place. It can happen **inside** and **outside** the language classroom, it can happen in **formal, non-formal** or even **informal** education settings (in fact, as we have pointed out, we learn languages easier and better when we employ them within the informal settings).

Learning can be a **conscious** or a **subconscious** process, and this should be linked to the **learning profiles** of individual learners. For example, some learners prefer to be told specifically what the grammar rules are and would favour carrying out a grammar task or some other drill in the classroom. The important thing to take from this is that learning is, very much, a very personal thing.

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Let’s go back to the link between **learning** English and **using** English. We have had the opportunity to notice that using and learning are interconnected, but the

ways in which this interconnection works are hard to pin down because they are extensive and intricate.

In its most simplistic form, learning is a prerequisite to using. In order to produce English we first need to learn English, we need to learn the essentials of communicating. And this is what teaching is traditionally supposed to aim at: to place learners in situations where they will experiment with language and its “rules” (they will “language”), do it a number of times and in different ways, practice, in other words, and then be ready for other situations, new and unexpected situations, where this learning and practice will prove useful.

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But this is by no means the only way we learn a language. Because the other way works just as well. We don't only need to learn language in order to use language.

We very often learn by using, as long as we care to notice what works and what does not work in our communication. In other words, the more we use language the more we learn how to use it. And so, learning a language has a more lasting effect when it is intrinsically linked with using it.

Of course, it is always important to remember the role of the third dimension to learning and using. And that is **context**, or where these processes (using and learning) take place.

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Activity 1

Taking into consideration everything we've mentioned so far, think about the reasons why **context** is important in using and learning English.

In particular, think about your previous experiences as learners and users of English—were there any mismatches between the two? Were there any occasions where learning and using, or using and learning did not meet? What can you tell us about those occasions?

Then, focus on your current experience as teachers—do you believe that the above mismatches still hold for your own learners? Why? What has changed?

Stop the video and note down your thoughts on these issues. Then, click the **link** under the video to share your views. Take your time to seriously consider these concerns before you continue with the video.

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Let's talk about **context**.

Where you live determines the frequency and quality of English that you are exposed to. If you live in a country where English is used all the time (e.g. in a city in the UK, the USA, Australia, etc.), then your use of the language outside the classroom would be much more frequent than if you lived in, say, a city in Greece, Brazil, France or Hungary.

Living in cities where English is not used extensively outside of the classroom means that you are not 'forced' to use English outside the typical foreign language classroom context. And this means that you would learn it (and learn to use it) differently.

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This is where the familiar, by now, concentric circles that Braj Kachru proposed in the mid-1980s can be useful. Living in Inner Circle contexts implies heightened exposure to authentic English, more and better use "by force" in other words, which also means better, naturalistic, learning.

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However, this very neat prioritisation of Inner Circle contexts as the "ideal" settings for providing top-notch opportunities for using and learning English is very simplistic and unable to provide a comprehensive picture the full story.

It is common knowledge, it has been for many years now, what with high Internet speeds and the rise of the spirit of globalisation, that, while many learners of English live in contexts where English is not typically used outside the classroom, they nevertheless do use a lot of English when they use online technologies, e.g., when they play videogames online.

All this raises the question: with everything we have said about learning and using, what can we say about the link between learning and teaching? With so much learning taking place in spite of teaching, can we go back and rethink the impact of teaching on learning?

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And this thought brings us to Activity 2, with which we will end this section.

While describing the impact of teaching on learning, Seidlhofer & Widdowson (2019) make a useful distinction between **teachers** and "**teachees**".

Think about the term “teachee”. What do you think it might mean? How would you define the two roles — think of them in the same way as “employer/employee”.

Once you’ve thought about that, draw your attention to the terms “teachee” and “learner”. Can you see a distinction between the two terms, which obviously refer to the same people (i.e. EFL students)? How are the two different?

Stop the video now to consider these questions. Then, click the link under the video to share your views with your other colleagues in the Forum.

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This is what Seidlhofer & Widdowson have to say on the matter:

“A good deal has been said about learner autonomy, the importance of allowing learners to take the initiative and to allow them to put the English they have learned to use in meaningful and purposeful ways. But in insisting on them conforming to ENL norms, we actually prevent them from doing this. The conventional view of classroom learning is that it is the reflex of teaching. An entirely dependent activity.

But of course in actual fact, teaching is dependent on learning and not the other way round. You cannot teach unless there are learners but you can learn without teachers—we do it all the time.

In effect, making learners in the classroom conform to teaching reduces their role—they become teachees. Just as employers have employees and trainers have trainees, so teachers have teachees. [...]”

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So, what do Seidlhofer and Widdowson suggest teachers should do?

“[...] The teacher would retain a crucial proactive role in activating and guiding the learning process. The difference would lie in the kind of process involved, and what allowance is made for learner initiative. Our argument is that instead of basing what and how we teach on how we think the students in classrooms ought to use their English as teachees, we should pay primary attention to how they actually do use their English as learners, and so guide them in the development of their communicative capability.”

In this way, using English takes top priority because it is the only part of the equation that is closer to the goal: learning. For learning to occur in the language classroom, teaching should serve using. Teaching should be informed by using.

And EFL teachers should keep their eyes and ears wide open to observe where and how their learners USE English outside of their classroom.