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Teacher Roles in Promoting Out-Of-Class Learning: Lessons from a Spanish For Specific Purposes Course

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss a small-scale case study that explores the important role teachers play in promoting out-of-class learning among their students. Data come from in-depth interviews with three of the teachers who delivered a Spanish for specific purposes blended course. I explored the different ways in which these teachers went about encouraging students to engage with the online segment of the course. The study is mainly informed by the notion of affordances (Cotterall, 2017; Murray, 2017; van Lier, 2004) and the growing body of literature on learning beyond the classroom (LBC) (Benson, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Reinders, 2020) where teachers play a pivotal role in promoting out-of-class learning. The main takeaway from this study is that for teachers to promote out-of-class learning, they should first identify the learning possibilities available in whatever materials students are to use outside of the classroom. In the case of this study, teachers had to promote the use of the learning platform that students were supposed to engage with as part of their out-of-class learning segment of the course. However, I found that only one teacher fully promoted out-of-class learning simply because she saw value in the platform and was able to help students see such value as well. The opposite was also true; the other two teachers did not seem to see much value in the platform and as a result, they were not entirely successful in promoting out-of-class learning among their students.

Keywords: learning beyond the classroom, independent study, out-of-class learning, Spanish, Spanish for Specific purposes, teacher roles

In this paper, I report on a small-scale qualitative case study that sought to explore how three teachers went about promoting out-of-class learning as part of a blended Spanish course. In the interest of clarity, I will start by providing some information about the course and the context where the study took place. I will then briefly discuss the theories and literature that underpin the study, and I will describe the study design, followed by a discussion of the findings. At the end of the paper, I will discuss the implications of the findings and the way forward to continue to expand our understanding of out-of-class learning.

The Course

This study took place at the university's language centre, where Spanish is the most popular language with the largest number of registered students. Trinidad and Tobago's official language is English, but given its close proximity to Latin America, Spanish is the first additional language of

choice to study formally in secondary schools and as an elective at university. The university's language centre teaches language courses to the university community and the general public, and, on request, we also design tailored courses for the corporate sector, mainly with a business component.

In 2018, I designed a beginner's Spanish for specific purposes course to be delivered for a local airline for which I adapted all content to suit the needs of individuals who deal with travelling and travel situations. Although the airline initially sought a fully online course, I was not entirely sure of the learners' readiness to face the demands of a fully online asynchronous Spanish course. After some discussion, the airline agreed to a 12-week, 45-hour blended course; two and a half hours of face-to-face teaching sessions and an hour and a half of independent study on Moodle weekly.

With the assistance of an instructional designer and another colleague, we designed all the activities that would be uploaded on the Moodle platform that learners would be required to complete as part of their course. Since the airline was paying for each individual learner, we were required to monitor learners' activity reports on Moodle to ensure that they were completing all online exercises. Before the course began, I instructed teachers on the importance of encouraging learners to complete the online activities on a weekly basis. Furthermore, the course outline stressed the importance of completing all online activities prior to each face-to-face session since the platform contained detailed explanations that learners had to study before class.

Learning Beyond the Classroom (LBC)

LBC is an area closely related to learner autonomy that is attracting growing attention. For this study, I followed a model proposed by Reinders (2020), which he developed based on earlier literature (Benson, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017). This model informs my study because it highlights the prime role teachers play in promoting LBC in formal language learning settings. Four key elements comprise this model, they include i) *location*, ii) *formality*, iii) *pedagogy*, and iv) *control*. *Location* refers to where learning takes place, whether a physical or a virtual space. In the case of my study, learning took place both in physical and virtual spaces and they supported each other. It was from the physical space that teachers had the responsibility to encourage learners to engage with the Moodle platform to study independently. *Formality* has to do with whether learners are taking a formal course to gain any form of qualification or learning the language informally for no qualification. The learners in this study were taking the course because their company made that opportunity available to them; however, they had to show commitment to the course in the face-to-face sessions and on the Moodle platform. *Pedagogy* deals with instruction and with how much instruction there is in the course or if there is no instruction at all. As explained above, this course did involve instruction and teachers had a

role to play in both language instruction and in supporting learners for LBC, a point I will develop below. *Control* has to do with how much choice is given to the learners or how much freedom of choice they have. Unlike an informal learning situation, for this course students did not exert much choice because all the content and material had been designed for them. Probably the one element of choice they had was to decide when and at what pace they would engage with the Moodle platform to study independently on a weekly basis.

Above, when I mentioned *pedagogy*, I introduced the notion of the teachers' role in supporting learners for LBC. Reinders' model (2020) makes it a point to suggest that getting learners involved is at the centre of the intersection between classroom learning and out-of-class learning. Teachers have the responsibility of supporting learners for LBC from the classroom. Reinders (2020, p. 67-68) describes the way in which teachers can support learners in four stages. The first stage is by *encouraging* learners to be more involved with the materials or the possibilities available to exercise LBC; teachers can do this by motivating students and by raising awareness of such possibilities. The second stage is by *preparing* learners for LBC through controlled practice; in other words, teachers should demonstrate in class what learners can do and should do outside of the classroom. In the case of this study, it was pivotal for teachers to use the platform in class to show learners the content and how to make the best use of the platform. The third stage is *supporting* LBC by providing assistance in the form of feedback and/or guided activities for learners to engage with activities and materials. In other words, after showing learners how to use a particular material, teachers should support learners throughout the course, guiding them with classroom and out-of-classroom activities that are conducive to meaningful feedback. The final stage is *offering learning opportunities* that require minimal LBC assistance. This final step is like the end of a scaffolding cycle where teachers allow learners to experiment on their own after providing scaffolded support.

This model illustrates that it is not enough to just state in the course outline that learners should do 'x' and 'y' and expect learners to abide simply because it is stated in writing. This model clearly illustrates that LBC or out-of-class learning requires both teacher and learner active involvement for it to work, or else, there can be learners left behind not fully aware of what they are expected to do.

Affordances

I found the notion of affordances particularly useful to look at the learning platform we created on Moodle as an affordance for LBC for both teachers and learners. The notion of affordances has been widely used in L2 learning research in sociocultural theory (Swain et al., 2011), identity theory (Norton, 2013; Toohey, 2007), complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Menezes, 2011, 2013),

sociocognitive approach to SLA (Atkinson, 2011), among others. Particularly in the field of learner autonomy and from a complexity theory perspective, Menezes (2011, 2013) views autonomy as a complex ecological system with different degrees of interdependence. In this perspective, learners often interact with environments, and such interactions are influenced by affordances and constraints. According to van Lier (2004), the notion of affordance "refers to what is available to the person to do something with. Some things clearly and directly signal their relevance to the person in a particular situation" (p. 91). He further adds that an affordance is "*action potential*, and it emerges as we interact with the physical and social world" (p. 92) (emphasis in original).

The key element of van Lier's view is the emphasis on relevance and action; affordances are elements available in the environment that can enable individuals to do something, in the case of language learning to learn and to use the language. Murray (2017) warns us that whenever we think of affordances as elements that are merely available in the environment to be used by individuals, he stresses the importance of learners' perceptions and adds that learners must "be able to see the potential in the environment. Affordances rely on the discourses surrounding the environment" (p. 122). As part of the social and physical world, and following van Lier's view, affordances must appear relevant for individuals to engage in action. If an affordance is not perceived as such, if it is not viewed as relevant, it may simply be overlooked or even underestimated.

Similar to Reinders' (2020) idea for supporting LBC, Cotterall (2017) also puts forward five affordances that can be used in classrooms to promote learner autonomy. Learners should be *engaged* with the activities and the topics. Learners should be able to *explore* things and ideas that matter to them. Learning should be *personalised* for learners to perceive personal relevance in what they are learning. The element of *reflection* is key for learners to continuously reflect on what they are learning. Finally, there has to be adequate *support* for learners to achieve more with the help of more experienced others than they can achieve alone. Engagement, exploration, personalisation, reflection, and support are the five affordances that we should aim to achieve in our classrooms to promote learner autonomy. Although it might be difficult under certain circumstances to make all five affordances available in a particular context, teachers should try as much as they can to incorporate the affordances they see fit to support their learners.

When I interviewed three of the teachers who delivered the course, I identified that their perceptions of the platform affected the ways in which they went about promoting its use among their learners. In the following section, I will briefly describe the design of the study and the kinds of questions I asked these teachers to assess their perceptions and use of the platform.

Methodology

The study I report in this paper is only a part of a larger qualitative case study where I assessed the entire implementation evaluating how students responded to the online segment of the course and how teachers had perceived the course, and the students' responses to it. For Creswell (2013), case study research is "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a *case*) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports)…" (emphases in original) (p. 97). As such, I am researching the real-life system of a particular blended Spanish course that was delivered by three teachers who also had the responsibility of promoting out-of-class learning as part of that course.

However, this paper only focuses on the teachers' perspectives. At the beginning of the project, I had not anticipated the great impact teachers would have on the outcome of the study, that is, the students' responses and engagement with the online platform. As part of the larger study, data took the form of end-of-course evaluation surveys where students assessed the course and provided their impressions of the online platform and other elements of the implementation. Students' perceptions were contrasted with the teachers' perspectives on the course as a whole, the online component, the online platform, and the role they played as teachers in promoting out-of-class learning. Since this paper only focuses on the teachers' perspectives, I shall now describe the interview and a narrative account that one of the teachers produced for this study.

Data Collection Strategies: The Interview and a Narrative Account

At the end of one of the cohorts for the course, I designed the following interview questions to have an in-depth conversation with the three teachers and assess the overall structure of the course:

1. How did you feel teaching the course?
2. What did you like best about teaching the course?
3. Based on student informal feedback and interaction, how well do you think the course design suited the company's needs?
4. What is your personal opinion about this Spanish for Specific Purposes course?
5. What do you think about the online component of the course?
6. How well were you able to link the online content with the course outline and the textbook?
7. Based on student feedback and your own observations, how did the students perceive and approach the online component of the course?

8. What comments did you hear from your students about the online content?
9. To what extent do you think the online component was effective for you to teach the course and for the students to learn?
10. Overall, how would you describe the students' attitudes towards the course?
11. What did you think about the venue and resources available to teach the sessions?
12. What aspect or aspects of the course do you think need improvement? Why?
13. Do you think students truly achieved the learning outcomes of the course? Provide examples of different factors to elaborate on your answer.
14. What would you recommend we do differently for future courses like this?

The main source of information was a face-to-face interview where each teacher and I spoke in Spanish, the three teachers' first language. With their signed consent, I recorded all the interviews and transcribed the recordings. Given that the interview sought to gather their perceptions of the course and their experience teaching it, questions 1 to 4 and 11 to 14 focus on general elements of the course. Therefore, they are beyond the scope of this paper. Questions 5 to 9 deal directly with the online component of the course, and question 10 indirectly asks about how the three teachers perceived their students' attitudes to the course as a whole and the online component. Questions 5 to 9 helped me to ask further questions to find out how the three teachers went about incorporating the online platform into their teaching.

Furthermore, I also asked one of the teachers to write a more detailed account of her experience in the form of a narrative. Since she seemed to have incorporated interesting elements to get her students involved and to get them to use the platform, I asked her to produce a detailed narrative in English to share with me step by step her teaching approach to promoting LBC.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the interviews, while I was conducting the face-to-face interviews, I took note of key comments and ideas mentioned by the teachers that I found relevant to the assessment of the course. I paid particular attention to the role that teachers had played in promoting the use of the platform. After this, I followed a systematic approach suggested by Creswell (2009) for analysing qualitative data. I first transcribed the interviews and then organised the transcripts for data analysis. When the transcripts were ready, I read all transcripts separately, i.e., each interview and the teacher's narrative written by one of the teachers. I read the interview transcripts and the narrative numerous times to make sense of the teachers' descriptions and experiences. I coded the information as I saw

themes emerging in the data that I was able to link to the literature on LBC and the notion of affordances. These elements became the themes that describe the area I sought to research for this study: the role of teachers in promoting out-of-class learning.

Teacher Profiles

It is also worth mentioning that given the nature of the university's language centre, all teachers rely mainly on textbooks to teach; there is no compulsory online component for the language courses delivered at the centre. The reason for this absence of an online component is the mixture of learners; we teach both registered university students *and* members of the general public. All registered university students have access to the Moodle platform, but members of the public do not have access to it, which is why at the university's language centre, we do not have an online component like other university courses do.

The following is a brief profile of the three teachers and myself as team leader and researcher. To protect their identities, I will refer to them as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3.

Teacher 1 is a female with over ten years of experience teaching at the university's language centre. She has taught all levels and has experience teaching both courses at the language centre and corporate courses. However, she does not have much experience using Moodle in her teaching. As I explained above, the courses at university's language centre do not have a compulsory online component. Teacher 1, therefore, relies mostly on textbooks for her teaching.

Teacher 2 is a male postgraduate student and a recent graduate from the BA in Spanish programme from the university. He is fully bilingual because his parents are originally from a Spanish-speaking country. As a student of the BA in Spanish degree programme, he was familiar with the Moodle platform. He also tutors for the degree programme where he is required to use Moodle.

Teacher 3 is a female teacher with over 15 years of teaching experience. She is also a full-time instructor on the BA in Spanish programme at the university, which is separate from the language centre's courses. She has experience teaching all levels of Spanish language. She is also very experienced in using Moodle and other digital tools as part of her full-time teaching job. She occasionally teaches courses at the university's language centre, where the main teaching tool is the textbook. However, she agreed to participate in this project because she found it interesting.

I am the course designer and the academic leader of the project. I had the responsibility of designing all elements of the course, but I did not have the opportunity to teach the course because my main remit is to teach courses at the university. I can design and oversee courses for the corporate sector, but as academic coordinator of the Spanish programme, I am not required to teach those

courses. I do have experience teaching courses that use Moodle as a compulsory element of a course, and I am familiar with blended courses. My role is also to recruit and supervise the teachers who teach these courses. In the conversations we had with the airline prior to beginning the course delivery, my director promised them that qualified native-speaker teachers would teach the course, so that was my main concern when recruiting teachers. The teachers' experience actively using technology, particularly Moodle, was not an item I was too concerned to check when I was recruiting them. However, when interviewing them for this study, I realised how pivotal it was.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of the Online Platform

Although the raw data collected from the teachers for the larger study is mainly in Spanish, i.e., I conducted the interviews and transcribed the recordings in Spanish, in the interest of time and space, I will present summarised versions of their perspectives in English. I will also provide a direct translation of powerful excerpts of data that inform the emergent themes for this study. The first two summaries illustrate how the teachers' attitude to the platform actually informed the way they used it (or not) in the classroom.

Teacher 1 – *I didn't know how to navigate the platform very well*

According to her experience, only learners with previous knowledge of Spanish reported using the platform actively, which was a minority. She described her own use of the online platform as minimal. She said she would very quickly check the content covered in the platform but did not become fully familiar with it. In her interview, she did not report an active use of the platform in her own role as the teacher of the course, in other words, she did not use the platform in the classroom. The following is a direct translation from Spanish:

> *I would lie to you if I told you that I went to the platform to check all the exercises. I didn't know how to navigate the platform very well.*

Teacher 2 – *I simply used the platform because I had to*

According to his experience, learners in his group mainly completed the online activities because they knew the airline's Human Resources department was monitoring their participation. The following is a direct translation from Spanish that captures this teacher's attitude to the platform and technology in general:

> *I used the platform in class, especially when students had questions and in order to avoid having to repeat an explanation several times. However, I must admit that I am not a big fan of technology and I simply used the platform because I had to.*

Teacher 1 openly admits that she never became familiar with the platform, and she did not report active and explicit efforts to use the platform. In fact, she actually reported how learners at times would appear confused, but it seems that the learners were not the only ones confused. Her honesty in admitting that she did not know how to navigate the platform too well seems to suggest that she may have been unable to support learners in their LBC. In light of Reinders' (2020) model, there is no evidence of encouragement, preparation, support, and the use of learning opportunities for learners to familiarise themselves with the platform. However, the fact that only those students who had some background in Spanish reported using the platform suggests that their previous knowledge of the language enabled them to engage in out-of-class learning, but this needs further exploration. It is worth noting that since the course was for beginners, all the explanations and the platform were in English and even when there was a Spanish mini dialogue, the platform provided subtitles in English.

Teacher 2 starts by saying that his learners used the platform because they had to, and then he admitted the exact same attitude; he used it because he had to despite not being a fan of technology. Although he did use it at times in class, the tone of his description does not sound particularly encouraging and supportive, especially after he admitted he does not fancy technology much.

In both cases, I could perhaps interpret that these two teachers did not seem to have perceived the platform as an affordance. Their interviews, their tones, and their attitudes might suggest that they did not see its relevance to making it part of their teaching and, in turn, they did not make an active effort to promote it among their learners. In the case of Teacher 1, if I go back to her profile, I should remind myself that she is not a teacher with much experience using online platforms for her teaching; as such, she feels more comfortable using the textbook, and it is the textbook before her what she perceives as the real affordance. Teacher 2 did report some use of the platform, but just like Teacher 1, he did not perceive it as an affordance. In his case, he does have experience using technology both as a student and as a teacher, but he openly admits that he is not a fan of technology, which might make it difficult for him to see the potential in it and, in turn, to promote its use.

Teacher 3 – *I knew I had to encourage them to use the platform and show them how to use it*

Teacher 3 provided me with explicit examples of how she encouraged her learners to use the platform. Her interview proved extremely informative, as the following summary illustrates. She

reported that, at first, her learners did not complete the activities and expected her to explain everything in class. However, from the first session, she stressed the importance of completing the online activities *before* class to save class time. She reported that by week four, all her students completed the online activities before class. When I heard that in our interview, I became intrigued as to how she managed to do that, and I felt that my follow-up questions were insufficient for her to give me the details I wanted. I asked her to create a narrative where she could detail how she went about encouraging her students to use the platform actively. The following is a summary of her own narrative, which I asked her to produce in English:

> *I had previous experiences using Moodle, so I anticipated common difficulties students experience at the beginning of each course. I didn't expect students to use the platform from the start. I knew I had to encourage them to use it and show them how to use it. In class, I showed students how to access Moodle and how to access each of the lessons. We completed activities from the lessons together in the classroom. Preparing class was never time consuming because ALL the content to cover in each class was the same content available on the platform. I simply started by completing all the same activities my students had to complete on the platform. I included screenshots from the platform in my slides for class to revise vocabulary or to present (again) a grammatical explanation.*

The fact that Teacher 3 saw potential in the platform for her teaching and for her group's learning could be linked to her previous experiences using Moodle. Based on her teaching experience using the platform as part of her full-time job teaching the Spanish degree, she was able to foresee that learners would not be ready to begin to interact with the platform from the start. Without being aware of it, Teacher 3 was able to incorporate some of the elements detailed in Reinders' (2020) model. She *encouraged* her learners from the beginning of the course. She *prepared* them to use the platform by explicitly showing them how to navigate it and by *supporting* them, and she did this in the classroom. The way she prepared her learners in the classroom for LBC illustrates well the intersection between classroom and out-of-classroom learning and how they can feed each other when there is adequate *teacher support* and *opportunities for practice*. Teacher 3 also seemed able to incorporate some of the affordances proposed by Cotterall (2017) to promote learner autonomy in the classroom as she made her classroom *engaging* and she *supported* her learners to engage with the learning platform and *explore* it on their own. *Engagement*, *exploration*, and *support* are salient elements in this teacher's approach to promoting the use of the online platform.

Discussion

The interviews with the three teachers and the written narrative by one of them suggest that previous experiences play a crucial role in the way teachers perceive certain resources as affordances. The online platform was only perceived positively by one of the teachers, Teacher 3 because she had previous experiences with teaching with Moodle. The tone of her interview and her narrative were favourable towards the online platform because she saw the positives and the potential it had both for her teaching and her group's learning. In fact, becoming familiar with the platform and all of the explanations and exercises was all she needed to plan her classes. Part of her lesson planning involved simply taking screenshots from the platform because she saw that everything she needed to teach, and everything her group needed to learn was explicit on the platform. Her favourable attitude to the platform translated into an active promotion of its use, which resulted in her learners actively and independently using the platform and completing all online exercises.

At the other end of the spectrum, I found Teacher 1, whose lack of experience using Moodle for her teaching may explain why she did not see much potential in the online platform to the point of admitting that she did not know too well how to navigate it. Unlike Teacher 3, Teacher 1 only checked the platform quickly and perhaps superficially to see what content to cover, but she relied more on the textbook, which was a real affordance for her, an affordance she was more familiar and comfortable using. In the middle, I found Teacher 2 who had previous experiences using Moodle both as a student and as a teacher. However, those previous experiences may not be of much use if he does not subscribe to the use of technology for his own teaching. Just like Teacher 1, he preferred to use the textbook.

This discussion takes me back to Murray's (2017) point that learners must "be able to see the potential in the environment. Affordances rely on the discourses surrounding the environment" (p. 122). How teachers perceive the affordances in the resources they expect learners to use is an element of great consideration. Two of the three teachers I interviewed did not see the potential of the online platform, they did not see its relevance to make it a part of their teaching and, in turn, they did not make an active effort to promote it among their learners. The discourses that surrounded the platform were produced by the teachers. In the case of Teachers 1 and 2, their discourses were not completely favourable and learners may have directly or indirectly received those messages. Teacher 3's discourses about the platform were highly favourable and she was able to convey that to her learners who eventually made an active use of the platform.

The last point in this discussion is a self-reflection on my role as team leader for the project and academic coordinator. In the recruitment process for this course, I simply looked at qualified native-

speaker teachers to fulfil the promise made to the airline. However, I overlooked the teachers' experience working with a platform like Moodle. Looking back, I should have probably done what Teachers 1 and 2 should have done with their learners: I should have walked them through the platform step by step to show them the potential of the materials that took me and my team so much time and effort to put together. I assumed that they would have familiarised themselves with the platform prior to their teaching, but that was only true for Teacher 3, which shows me that even teachers need a level of encouragement and support to implement resources that are new to them. It is insufficient to tell them or to put it in writing because not everyone might listen and/or read carefully and attentively.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the ways in which three teachers went about using and promoting an online platform as part of a blended Spanish for specific purposes course. The main takeaway from this study is that to promote out-of-class learning teachers must see the potential of the resources that learners will use for out-of-class learning. If teachers see potential in a particular resource, they will be able to help their learners to see that potential as well. However, if teachers do not perceive a resource as relevant for their teaching and for the learners' learning, they might have a hard time or even be unable to help learners to see that potential. In this study, out of three teachers, only one was fully able to promote out-of-class learning. The other two teachers were not as successful because their lack of experience with a platform like that or their lack of interest in the use of technology for teaching blurred their vision about the true potential of the online platform. In conclusion, teachers must see resources for LBC as relevant affordances in order to encourage learners and support their LBC.

Another important takeaway is that just as learners need encouragement and support to use certain resources for LBC, so do teachers. Teaching implementations where teachers are not entirely familiar with some resources require some kind of formal or informal training for teachers to familiarise themselves with the resources that they are expected to promote among their learners.

Future studies on promoting out-of-classroom language learning should take into consideration teachers and learners' perceptions on the resources used. This study has stressed the importance of affordances and how affordances are influenced by individuals' perceptions, as such, perceptions on resources for LBC or out-of-classroom learning deserve much further empirical research.

Notes on the Contributor

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