



## Meaningful Interaction Providing Input and Output Opportunities for English Use in EFL Learners' Social Networks

Elena Meștereagă<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Most of the language acquisition theories underline the need of exposure to the target language by providing EFL learners those situations in which English is visible and audible. Thus learners are able to get greater familiarity with the target language creating more chances for EFL acquisition. If EFL learning is affected by various variables, the input represents a significant one being the first side of the language learning process. Among the factors affecting EFL learning and use in EFL learners' social networks a significant contribution is that of interpersonal space which connects learners' social relations and their interactions, as they are generated by the learners in daily life. In such contexts their identities can be affirmed and occur generation of knowledge by collaboration, thus developing linguistic skills.

**Keywords:** EFL acquisition; input; output; interpersonal space

### 1. Introduction

EFLTs are encouraged by Bentley's (1998) remark "to make full use of the resources that an information society offers" (p. 3) and to handle the overload of discovering in learners contexts such capacities which can help learning without screening out those instruments or situations that can contribute to EFL/L2 learning. OOCs

<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus Olahus Orăștie Technological High School, Romania, Address: 25 Octavian Goga Street, Orăștie 335700, Romania, Corresponding author: elena.mestereaga@gmail.com.



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors.  
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

related to EFLLs are represented by those situations in which English learning happens outside of the school space. Benson (2001) states that out-of-class learning (OOCL) is “any kind of learning that takes place outside the classroom” and it falls into three categories: self-instruction, naturalistic language learning and self-directed naturalistic language learning (p. 62). When students locate available resources and use them to improve English they are self-instructing, falling into the first category of OOCL. Second category refers to learning that takes place when EFLLs unintentionally communicate and interact English speakers, either natives or non-natives (when English is used as lingua franca - ELF). The third category includes EFL learning that takes place in a situation searched or intentionally created by EFLL. In this situation learners use environmental and social tools to generate learning situation from their initiative.

In order to fully understand OOCs “we should be drawing in the fullest possible range of resources from outside the school gate, and create (ing) delivery systems which can provide individualised packages of support to each young person” (Bentley, 1998, p. 74). Which is a demanding task as long as EFLTs work with groups of learners, not with individuals.

Concerned with the same aspect Sundqvist (2009) named English used outside schools as extramural, where mural stands for walls, including those contexts that are out of walls. Extramural English is defined by Sundqvist (2009) in his study regarding the impact of out-of-school English on the oral proficiency and vocabulary of a group of Swedish ninth graders as “the English that learners come in contact with or are involved in outside the walls of the classroom” (p. 24). In such situations of real communication, socializations, gaming and any other activities from EFLLs life, the four skills are used in tandem. The receptive ones, listening and reading which are somehow passive, cannot be isolated by the productive skills, speaking and writing, which are more active.

EFLTs are encouraged to “create an inventory of real-world communication tasks that ask learners to use language, not for its own sake, but to achieve goals that go beyond language, for example, to obtain food and drink, to ask for and give directions, to exchange personal information” (Nunan, 2015, p. 13). The 44 good learners which participated in Nunan’s (1991) study learnt EFL in Southeast Asian countries were investigated to identify patterns or personal experiences for their success in English learning. Participants were surveyed about learning methods that helped them and what they have done to learn English. All participants agreed that formal instruction was insufficient and Nunan points out that EFLLs’ success was

due to learners' willingness to exercise their language skills out-of-class participating in activities such as speaking with their friends and with natives in English, watching TV or reading newspapers.

### **1.1. Input Opportunities**

Most of the language acquisition theories underline the need of exposure to the target language. By providing EFLs with situations in which English is visible and audible, learners are able to get greater familiarity with the target language, which creates more chances for EFL acquisition. If EFL learning is affected by various variables, the input represents a significant one being the first side of the language learning process. Thus input becomes an important factor in the progress of EFLs. Classroom with its specific offers consistent grammar, form and meaning occasions for input by EFLs contribution, audio materials and classmates. In order to aid EFL/L2 acquisition input needs to be challenging yet comprehensible. The emphasis on authentic listening and reading materials represents the interest for EFLs from Romania and many other countries from the Expanding Circle, in order to provide EFLs texts and audio materials used in real situations (Harmer, 2007; Scrivener, 2005). Leung (1996, p. 26) drawing on Cummins' BICS and CALP distinction encourages teachers to provide supportive context for learners in order to bring in the classroom the benefits of the outer environment. However, such activities are limited to few minutes per hour or week, depending on the weekly number of classes.

On the account of this limitation researchers interested in EFL/L2 learning and acquisition including Brooks (1992), Cummins (1992), Pickard (1996), Leung (1996), Suh et al. (1999) and Byrnes (2006) explored opportunities for meaningful input in out-of-class situations. English books, movies, TV, internet, songs, games and many other tools that surround the learner represent situations in which input is provided. EFLs spend considerable time listening music or radio programs, reading novels, newspapers, or academic books, watching TV programs, videos surfing the internet, etc.

From their studies Brooks (1992) and Suh et al. (1999) concluded that watching TV and cinema movies, listening music and interacting with native speakers represent the most frequent activities that surveyed learners do in OOCs. Pickard's (1996) study indicates that the highest ranked activities outside the classroom in which they use English are listening radio and reading newspapers and novels. From these study cases results that a considerable input is provided to EFLs without the intervention

of EFLT. Interaction with native speakers where EFLs can practice their English and negotiate meaning by BICS has no chances to be encountered in the classroom, except the very rare cases in Romania when the teacher is a native speaker. Although challenging for EFLs, such interactions have a significant contribution on language practice and identity construction.

Cummins (1992) argues that a central reason for failing in developing proficiency in L2 academic skills represents the focus on context reduced communication. “The more context-embedded the initial L2 input, the more comprehensible it is likely to be and, paradoxically, the more successful in ultimately developing L2 skills in context-reduced situations” (p. 21). Once input provided creates a deposit with English structures and lexis, EFLs have chances to use it on their own in context-embedded situations from OOCs. And in such contexts “the learner who is willing to guess, risks making mistakes and tries to communicate in the L2 will tend, given the opportunity, to be more successful” (Yule, 2010, p. 192). OOC takes place in situations that provide support and encourages learners to try as much as possible their EFL/L2 skills usage in order to successfully communicate. Such naturalistic contexts are more beneficial than one that emphasizes mistakes, brings many corrections and generates a feeling of failure to be perfectly accurate during the classes as EFLs are expected to be. Indeed, the more EFLs see and listen, the more chances are for such comprehensible input to transform into English noticed, acquired and learnt. What EFLs see and hear greatly influence what they say and write.

## **1.2. Output Opportunities**

Meaningful practice of English vocabulary and structures involves language production. The subject of EFL output in EFL classes represents the interest topic for EFLTs and EFL researchers (Cummins, 2000; Harmer, 2007). The issue of English output in OOCs is also a concern for a considerable amount of studies: Ellis and He (1999), Pica et al. (1989), Hyland (2004), Cabot (2016), Miglbauer and Kotikoski (2015) and others. EFLs have plenty of opportunities in the OOCs to produce English on their own from their initiative. Hyland (2004) enumerates such activities that students do using English including phone conversations, speaking with people in the stores, talking to family members, friends, colleagues, writing projects or e-mails and many others.

The output activities in EFL use and learning are mainly characterized by greater cognitive demand than input activities, as they imply not only receiving the language

as it is the case of input, but also producing English. Negotiation for meaning and interaction with L1 or L2 speakers of English, writing short messages, emails, essays or any other kind of text represent occasions for output where BICS are developed.

By contrast with input, Cummins (2000) considers that both context-embedded and context-reduced output activities can be at the same extent cognitively demanding, just as an intellectual discussion with two people requires the same cognitive processing as it would take composing an article on the same subject. "Similarly, writing an e-mail message to a close friend is, in many respects, more context-embedded than giving a lecture to a large group of people" (p. 70).

Linguistic output according to Swain (1985, 1993, 1995) has three main roles in learning: to notice, to test and formulate hypothesis, and the last one is metalinguistic function. By the noticing function EFLLs realise what they understand incompletely or what they do not apprehend from the linguistic problems encountered. By the second function of output EFLLs test out words or new structures. The metalinguistic function of output consists in meaning and form negotiation, as a reflective or cognitive process. In collaborative dialogues often is negotiated only the meaning. OOCs provide a complementary and compensatory function to institutional learning in terms of these functions of output, either written or oral production.

Cabot's (2016) study concerning OOCL and formal education evince a difference among males and females: "out-of-school learning might be important for oral output for males, while in-school learning seems essential for oral output for females, especially for the noticing and testing functions of output" (p. 181). Ellis and He's (1999) study analysed what are the implications of the modified output on lexis learning during their lessons. Pica et al. (1989) mention that clarification or confirmation requests as part of transactional moves result into post modified output in a significant cases of learners' utterances thus contributing to language acquisition.

According to Gass and Selinker (2001) output in language learning has four functions: forms and meaning examination, validation by feedback provision, shift determination from form-focused to meaning-based processing, and development of automaticity and speech fluency in learners' production. During the collaborative interaction EFLLs engage in output production and deliberately help each other, speculate language structures and acquire language in the process.

### **1.3. Social Media**

From the debut of Messenger (Yahoo!, MSN) in 1999 and LinkedIn in 2002 as the first tools for social media, the communicative area has changed over the last two decades in an unprecedented manner. The widespread of the next social media applications: Myspace 2003, Facebook 2004, YouTube 2005, Twitter 2006 and WhatsApp 2009 has also enlarged greatly the number of users of this new and already became common tool of socialization. In this era of technological progress social media provides by its products and services an extensive range of means for online communication such as messaging, chat, blogs, file sharing and many others. Young learners of the world wide generation are up to date with sites like Facebook, Google, YouTube, Skype, Snapchat, WhatsApp, or Wiki, and many of them are often used for various reasons. The prominent factor for using social media among young and adults alike is for leisure activities or personal reasons. Instead of considering them as threats for the young generation, there is a severe need to help them realise that these new connections may become opportunities for EFL learning and use. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) encourage us to look at the virtual networks offered by the “recent availability of computers, smart phones, and other devices [that] has produced entirely new types of networking which many people now use extensively” (71). Such media assisted communications function now as speech communities where EFLs can speak with natives or other nationalities people using English in meaningful situations.

Notwithstanding a relatively new issue, the connection between L2/EFL teaching and learning and social media use, represented the research topic for studies conducted by Lamy and Hampel (2007), Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011), Zourou (2012), Garcia and Garcia (2013), Erstad (2014) and Salminen (2014). Special studies regarding the support provided by social media in language learning were issued by Demaizière and Zourou (2012), Hrastinski and Dennen (2012), Zourou (2012), Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015). Their studies underlined that using social media tools including online games, Facebook, Livemocha etc, endorse language learning, and proposals for the use of online tools during classes as complementary to traditional forms of instruction are included in these surveys. To enhance learners’ engagement, interaction or collaborations, internet and computer technologies are frequently used in language learning as new and attractive devices for instruction.

Cummins (2000a) considers that the range of autonomous and communicative functions of language that individuals are able and willing to handle is determined by the degree of socialization within a particular community. “Thus, socialization

within particular schooling contexts promotes the acquisition of language registers that are valued within those contexts” (p. 62). EFLTs do not need to control such registers, or to try to influence them. It is enough to value that some English used by the EFLLs in their various socializations.

By their nature, the electronic tools, devoid EFLLs by the physical presence of the partaking people in communication, but exactly this inconvenient turns into the advantage of offering opportunities for communication with people from various parts of the country or from abroad. The study of Miglbauer and Kotikoski (2015) investigates the students’ use of English outside the classroom in education institutions from Austria and Finland and use of social media in their particular context. The results of the survey applied to about 160 students show that a high percentage of students use English in social media with a higher percentage on receptive rather than on productive language use. This seems natural that dominant activities to consist in reading and listening, and the less frequent to be speaking and writing.

From the research of Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) resulted that social media use in higher education enables PLEs empowering learners to bring their personal agency in the process of learning. They also mention that for a successful leverage of social media on the generation of PLEs, learners should be able to manage their activities to balance creativity, communication and knowledge management. Students should be encouraged to select from the social media tools those activities that develop their EFL skills and confidence in the use of English. They also need to organize and customize their own PELEs from the social media in order to self-aware and self-direct their socialization into opportunities of English learning.

## **2. Enhancing EFL Learning and Use**

OOCs offer fantastic opportunities for learning which deserve proper attention for the benefit of both EFLLs acquisition and EFLTs activity. Expanding the area of interest beyond the classroom walls where EFLLs encounter plenty of opportunities to expand their learning process, we are placed on the complex ground of establishing the relevance of learners’ realistic context in English learning and use. We ventured to do this because “a better understanding of how learning takes place across settings, and of the possible synergies and barriers between them, may help educators find ways to supplement school based opportunities” (Barron, 2006, p. 194). Romanian EFLLs being situated in the Expanding Circle where they have least

chances to encounter it compared with English learners from Inner and Outer Circles according Kachru (1985), they need most motivation to use all learning situations from their social networks within OOCs. The impact of L2/EFL use in proficient language learning was explored in several studies conducted in recent decades. Martinsen et al. (2010) focused in their study on language learning progress from three learning contexts: studying abroad, service learning abroad and foreign language housing. This study evinces a positive correlation between English use with L2 speakers and the progress in language proficiency. However, Romanian EFLs' context is determined by Romanian particular social and interactional conditions where input and output opportunities vary from English learners' contexts within other countries.

Theories of L2/EFL learning mentioned in this paper apply better to OOCs where informal learning is experienced in real life situations. Situated learning from Sefton-Green's (2006) perspective demands understanding learning as a social process, and to make sense of learning we are encouraged to look closely at the sociocultural context of the learner. By this approach the nature of real experiences in EFLs contexts are emphasised. From this perspective learning provided by social and real OOCs through social interaction where EFLs' identity is negotiated and developed, games, films, and any other activities learners do every day, represent a more contextualized learning compared to context-reduced learning often encountered in English textbooks in classes. If there are some concepts whose grasping can be difficult to achieve in the class, there is a complementary chance provided by the EFLs' social context. This is the place where creativity and imagination are nurtured without any intervention and by agentic moves within PELEs they develop as English users. Learners' minds are free to explore the outer world and they contract daily networks within their communities of practice as part of natural social life.

Nunan (2015) recognizes that encouraging EFLs to use English outside the classroom can be challenging because some EFLs think that using a language means speaking that language and many learners are not able to do this at early stages. But there are many other ways to use English in OOCs. "Making a pen pal can be a solution to encourage learners to interact and communicate – it also increases their motivation to learn the language. Also, I suggest watching a lot of movies without subtitles, writing a diary every day, and extensive reading" (Nunan, 2015, p. 13). In other words, EFLs can make significant progress in English learning directing their activities from OOCs by proper motivation in language learning opportunities.



Finally, it should be pointed out that EFLs need to be encouraged to depend less on EFLT and take charge of their EFL/L2 learning by sensitizing them about the learning process. When learners are encouraged to sensitize the environment and context where EFL learning occurs, they will be able to discover how actually they learn English. It is possible that shy EFLs will not prefer to have face-to-face conversations in English with native speakers, but they also may have benefits from expanding practising English online through social media, listening or reading materials, and so on. Among the factors affecting EFL learning and use in EFLs' social networks a significant contribution is that of interpersonal space which connects learners' social relations and their interactions, as they are generated by the learner in daily life. In these social network contexts EFLs identities can be affirmed and occur generation of knowledge by collaboration, thus developing linguistic skills.

## References

- Barron, B. (2006). Interest and Self-Sustained Learning as Catalysts of Development *Human Development*, Vol. 49(4), pp. 193-224.
- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. London: Longman.
- Bentley, T. (1998). *Learning Beyond the Classroom. Education for a Changing World*. London: Routledge.
- Brooks, F. B. (1992). Communicative Competence and the Conversation Course: A Social Interaction Perspective. *Linguistics and Education*. Vol. 4(2), pp. 219-246.
- Byrnes, H. (2006). *Advanced Language Learning: The Contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*. London: Continuum.
- Cabot, M. (2016). In or Out of School? Meaningful Output with Digital and Non-digital Artefacts within Personal English Learning Ecologies. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, Vol. 11(3), pp. 165-184.
- Cummins, J. (1992). Language Proficiency, Bilingualism and Academic Achievement. Richard-Amato, P. A. & Snow, M. A. (eds) *The Multicultural Classroom*. New York: Longman.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Dabbagh, N. & Kitsantas, A. (2011). Personal Learning Environments, Social Media, and Self-Regulated Learning: A Natural Formula for Connecting Formal and Informal Learning. *Internet and Higher Education*.
- Demaizière, F. & Zourou, K. (guest eds.) (2012). Social Media and Language Learning: (r)evolution? *Special Issue. Alsic* 15/1.

- Ellis, R. & He, X. (1999). The Roles of Modified Input and Output in the Incidental Acquisition of Word Meanings. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, Vol. 21(2), pp. 285-301.
- Erstad, O. (2014). The Expanded Classroom - Spatial Relations in Classroom Practices Using ICT. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, Vol. 9(1), pp. 8-22.
- Garcia-Martin, J. & Garcia-Sanchez, J. N. (2013). Patterns of Web 2.0 Tool Use among Young Spanish People. *Computers & Education*, No. 67, pp. 105-120.
- Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Hrastinski, S. & Dennen, V. (guest eds.) (2012). Social Media in Higher Education. Special Issue: *Internet and Higher Education*, No. 15.
- Hyland, F. (2004). Learning Autonomously: Contextualizing Out-of-class English Language Learning. *Language Awareness*, Vol. 13(3), pp. 180-202.
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, Codification, and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle. *English in the World: Teaching and Learning of Language and Literature*, Randolph Quirk & Henry Mddowson eds., pp. 11-30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamy, M. N. & Hampel, R. (2007). *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching*. Palgrave: Basingstoke.
- Leung, C. (1996). Context, Content and Language. Tony Cline & Norah Frederickson, *Curriculum Related Assessment, Cummins and Bilingual Children*, pp. 26-40. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Martinsen, R.; Baker, W.; Dewey, D.; Bown, J. & Johnson, C. (2010). Exploring diverse settings for language acquisition and use: Comparing study abroad, service learning abroad, and foreign language housing. *Applied Language Learning*, Vol. 20, pp. 45-69.
- Meyerhoff, M. (2002). *Communities of Practice*. Chambers et al.
- Miglbauer, M. & Kotikoski, T. (2015). Students' Use of English Outside the Classroom and its Impact on Teaching the Four Skills: A Best Practice Example of an Online Writing Project. Posted in *Integration with Substance*, May 2015. Accessed November 27, 2016. <http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:jamk-issn-2343-0281-2>
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language Teaching Methodology*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Nunan, D. (2015). *Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages*. New York: Routledge.
- Pica, T.; Holliday, L.; Lewis, N. & Morgenthaler, L. (1989). Comprehensible Output as an Outcome of Linguistic Demands on the Learner. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, Vol. 11(1), pp. 63-90.
- Pickard, N. (1996). Out-of-class Language Learning Strategies. *English Teaching Journal*. Vol. 50, pp. 150-159.

- Salminen, J. (2014). Leveraging Facebook as a Peer-support Group for Students. In: Benson, F. & Morgan, S. (eds). *Cutting-edge Technologies and Social Media Use in Higher Education*. Hershey: IGI Global, pp. 195-212.
- Scrivener, J. (2005). *Learning Teaching – A Guidebook for English Language Teachers*, (2nd Ed.). Oxford: Macmillan Education.
- Sefton-Green, J. (2004). Literature Review in Informal Learning with Technology outside School. *Futurelab Series*, Report 7. Web: 08 February 2017.
- Suh, J. S.; Wasansomsithi, P.; Short, S. & Majid N. A. (1999). *Out-of-class Learning Experiences and Students' Perceptions of their Impact on Conversation Skills*. Research report. Eric Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics. ERIC document no. ED433715.
- Sundqvist, P. (2009). *Extramural English Matters: Out-of-school English and its Impact on Swedish ninth Graders' Oral Proficiency and Vocabulary*. Karlstad, Sweden: Karlstad University Press.
- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development. In Gass, S. & Madden, C. (Eds.). *Input and Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury, pp. 235-252.
- Swain, M. (1993). The Output Hypothesis: Just Speaking and Writing Aren't Enough. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, Vol. 50(1), pp. 158-164.
- Swain, M. (1995). Three Functions of Output in Second Language Learning. In Gook, G. & Seidlhofer, B. (Eds.). *Principle and practice in applied linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 125-144
- Wardhaugh, R. & Fuller, J. M. (2015). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Yule, G. (2010). *The Study of Language*. 4th ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zourou, K. (2012). On the Attractiveness of Social Media for Language Learning: a Look at the State of the Art. In *Alsic*, Vol. 15(1).