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BEYOND THE FIXED CURRICULUM: NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO ENHANCE EFL LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of non-traditional classroom approaches to increase learner engagement in English as a second/foreign language context. It draws on three existing studies that focus on humor during classes, humor in off-task classroom spaces, and selective vulnerability. The three reviewed literature works suggest that teacher-student bonding, classroom atmosphere, social connection, and chances for student interaction can contribute to the students' comfort, participation, motivation, and willingness to take risks in language learning. At the same time, the studies show that these practices should be used purposefully and in balance: too much humor might interfere with the lesson productivity, while excessive teacher disclosure might lower students' respect towards a teacher and perceptions about their expertise. Based on the synthesis, this thesis argues that non-traditional approaches should not replace structured language instruction but can support or complement the curriculum when teachers use them selectively and sensitively.

Keywords: Learner engagement, humor, selective vulnerability, EFL, classroom interaction, teacher-student bonding, interaction

Introduction

EFL teaching is often organized around planned objectives, tasks, textbooks, and assessment requirements. This is required for systematic language development, but the classroom interaction is not exclusively limited to what is included in the syllabus. Students need a safe learning atmosphere and react to the emotional and social environment of the classroom. When they feel comfortable communicating, making mistakes, interacting with their instructor, it creates conditions for greater student engagement and motivation. The literature reviewed for this work includes several practices that can contribute to such an environment, particularly, informal interaction, humor, and selective vulnerability.

The purpose of this thesis is to synthesize three relevant studies and examine how their findings can inform EFL teaching. Dávila (2019) examines humor and playful language among multilingual learners in high school. Victoria (2019) concentrates on humor in off-task spaces of language classes. Nushi and Fattahi (2024) study selective vulnerability, through which teachers share their experiences of difficulty or imperfection in order to encourage risk-taking and create connection with students. Although these studies differ in form and timing, they share a common purpose: enhancing learner participation, motivation and creating a safe learning environment.

LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSION

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The three studies show that in language classrooms, motivation of students greatly depends on a friendly atmosphere, mutual understanding, and collaboration, and to achieve this, EFL teachers use many different approaches and strategies. In her article, Dávila (2019) studies how humor affects students' interaction with each other and whether or not it increases their interest in language learning. Researching on high school students who come from immigrant or refugee families, Dávila (2019) finds that humor plays an important role in making ESL classrooms more interesting, creating bonding between students and motivating progress in language learning. 'Pedagogically, teachers can make use of student's humorous, translingual interactions by opening up spaces where students can engage one another with humor orally and in writing' (Dávila, 2019, p. 11).

A similar study conducted by M. Victoria in 2019 on ESL college students who came from different linguistic backgrounds identified that humor in off-task classroom moments can lighten students' mood and reduce their anxiety encouraging them to feel more comfortable and engage in lessons. On the other hand, Nushi and Fattahi (2024) suggest another method, selective vulnerability, which can develop an easy learning environment among students. The term refers to examples of failures and difficulties experienced by teachers to increase student motivation and willingness to take risks in learning a second language.

All three studies explore ways of making language learning easier, more natural, and tension-free. Additionally, non-traditional practices like using humorous talks and sincere conversations between teachers and students can strengthen students' social relationships and sense of belonging in and outside of school (Dávila, 2019, p. 9). All three approaches are not included in the everyday curriculum or syllabus. They are limited in scope, but Victoria (2019) points out that it is worth paying attention to 'often overlooked and undervalued non-curriculum-oriented spaces waiting to be explored for their potential in providing affordances and opportunities for relationship building between teachers and students' (p. 8). However, too much humor can interfere with the lesson's productivity. Everything should be kept in balance. The same can be said about sharing vulnerabilities. Nushi and Fattahi (2024) clearly warn that oversharing weaknesses may cause uncertainty in teachers' knowledge. "We recommend keeping the balance, as you do not want to lose your students' trust in your knowledge by oversharing your vulnerable side" (p. 4).

Though the studies are similar in purpose, they differ in how the suggested methods are applied and in their timing. Victoria (2019) and Dávila (2019) highlight that moments of humor occur naturally and spontaneously in lessons, while Nushi and Fattahi's (2024) approach is an intentional practice and requires preparation beforehand. Another distinction is that selective vulnerability is mainly oriented toward student progress, whereas humor is more a factor in social bonding.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

One implication for a classroom is that teachers can leave limited space for real interaction within the structured lessons. They can allow appropriate student humor and brief informal exchanges, and use naturally occurring interaction moments to build communication. This does not mean transforming the lessons into entertainment-driven



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process. Rather, teachers could incorporate humor when it supports communication, does not embarrass students, and does not interrupt the learning objective substantially.

A second implication concerns selective vulnerability. It should be planned, purposeful, and relevant to a particular situation students are in. For instance, an instructor may briefly describe a difficulty he experienced in language learning to connect this experience to the students' current challenge. Such disclosure can normalize mistakes and encourage student participation when facing uncertainty or embarrassment. Nevertheless, Nushi and Fattahi (2024) emphasize the importance of balance in order not to weaken students' confidence in teacher's knowledge as discussed earlier.

Another implication is the need to consider learner and cultural differences. Humor is not understood in the same way by everyone, and students may differ in how comfortable they feel with teacher self-disclosure and informal interaction. Therefore, teachers should observe student behavior and adapt their practices accordingly. Non-traditional approaches are most useful when they do not replace, but rather complement objectives of the lesson and systematic instruction.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed in this thesis indicates that non-traditional approaches can be valuable in providing support for learner engagement. Dávila (2019) and Victoria (2019) highlight the interactional potential of humor, while Nushi and Fattahi (2024) demonstrate how selective vulnerability can create a safer learning environment for EFL students. The common topic of all these studies is the importance of communication and classroom atmosphere in increasing participation. The approaches suggested should be used selectively. Humor should not reduce instructional productivity, and the teacher vulnerability should not be disclosed excessively. The best pedagogical position is therefore not to completely abandon the curriculum, but to complement it with purposeful and meaningful practices. Further classroom-based research could look into how different learners react to non-traditional approaches like the one discussed in the thesis, and under what circumstances they most effectively support engagement in EFL classrooms.

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