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Nathan Thomas, University of Oxford, UK

Corresponding author:

nathan.thomas@education.ox.ac.uk

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Exploring Facilitative and Debilitative Spaces: A Shift in Focus from Classrooms to Learning Systems

Nathan Thomas, University of Oxford, UK

Physical classrooms are often overlooked in educational research. While teachers, students, materials, and methodologies have all been the foci of studies for many years, research into the spaces in which instructed second language acquisition takes place is, for the most part, absent in the literature. In Thomas (2018a, 2018b), I argued that exploring these spaces and the affordances they provide is a necessary endeavor if we are to offer a holistic view of learning. It should be noted that my discussion of learning spaces refers to formal education settings—classrooms—and not self-access centers. However, I believe that relevant work in the field of self-access learning can indeed inform classroom design in instructed settings. Therefore, I use this work to support my discussion. As a work-in-progress report, this short paper will first describe my work up until this point, and second, explain how my ideas about learning spaces have transformed over time. I will discuss a new direction in which this and other studies may take. This new direction involves viewing classroom spaces as complex language learning systems and harnessing successful strategies students use within these systems to allow learning to take place. This focus on learning spaces as complete systems, as opposed to just their physical characteristics, has implications for how students can be better prepared to learn beyond the classroom.

The Psychology of the Language Learning Classroom

One idealistic goal of modern formal education is that it should prepare students to learn beyond the classroom. Whether it actually does so is another story. Nevertheless, classrooms send messages to students (and teachers) about what is and is not possible; how they can and should behave; and how learning takes place. Oblinger (2006) describes this as the *built pedagogy* of the room. The design and resources of a space will often communicate just as much or more to students as a teacher will. For example, desks in neat rows facing forward send an implicit message that students are to look and to listen, not to move around or interact. In this common scenario, the affordances, which Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015) define as “[t]he perceived resources in the environment that learners can interact with in order to learn” (p. 149), rely on a teacher to be constructed, arranged, and disseminated. In

Thomas (2018a, 2018b) I reported on an investigation of the affordances present in primary-level classrooms and compared them with various tertiary-level settings. This line of work began in Osment and Thomas (2017), where my colleague and I designed a basic rubric for assessing classroom affordances. The *Classroom Affordance Assessment Rubric* (CAAR) is little more than a crude tool for teachers and students to assess the affordances of their classrooms and is not recommended for serious researchers. However, its aims are still relevant in that it helps to stimulate discussion regarding classroom affordances by assessing the four aspects of *Affordance Noticeability*, *Affordance Accessibility*, *Affordance Transference*, and *Affordance Variety*. In piloting the rubric, we found that in all of the classrooms we examined, rooms designed for younger learners contained more, and more varied, affordances. In general, the affordances present in classrooms for younger learners were more noticeable (e.g. easily identifiable areas or stations for specific activities or skill development), more accessible (e.g. open shelves at a level that could be accessed freely by children), and had greater potential to be utilized in new and novel ways (e.g. a designated area to sit informally, interact with others, and engage in collaborative learning). It was clear to us then, after exploring tertiary-level classrooms, that “we [as educators] have failed to consider the communication potential of the classroom itself, and the authentic resources for interaction it has to offer,” (van Lier, 1988, p. 30).

We argued that much useful information could be gleaned for tertiary-level classrooms by observing those at the primary level. Primary-level learning spaces afforded what Tudor (2001) describes as the classroom *as* communication—providing learning opportunities by its mere design and outfitting. We contended that affordance-rich classrooms are typically not multipurpose (they are specialized for the subject), need not rely on expensive technology, and are able to accommodate a wide-range of learning styles. Most notably, we maintained that learning can take place in these rooms even when a teacher is not present, due to the affordances of the room itself. Thus, we considered affordance-rich classrooms *facilitative spaces*; those with fewer perceived resources and that relied heavily on a teacher to ‘provide the learning’ were considered *debilitative spaces* (Thomas, 2018a).

Generally, those interested in self-access learning design have not made this same mistake as those in formal education settings in underestimating the effect the design of a room may have on learning. For example, Edlin (2016), notes that the physical characteristics of self-access learning contexts “may play a larger relative role in learning and activity for a particular space, thus underscoring the importance of good design in those spaces to create effective places for learning” (p. 120). Edlin’s reasoning, which is echoed by others in his

field, is mainly due to the absence of a teacher to lead the learning in a self-access context, compared with a traditional classroom where a teacher is usually present. Edlin (2016) provides six design principles to enhance self-access learning spaces. A learning environment should elicit a positive emotional response, feel safe, enable social interaction, be comfortable, increase accessibility, and remain flexible. It would be hard to argue against the idea that these very principles should, and could, also be applied to formal learning environments. In comparing Edlin's principles with the results from our preliminary studies, it is evident that the primary-level classrooms (which we considered facilitative spaces) generally embodied these principles while most of the tertiary-level spaces were severely lacking. Nevertheless, there is more to be considered than just the room and the resources.

Learning from Studies on Self-Access Centers

The main benefit of facilitative spaces is that they have the potential to afford and promote learner autonomy and self-regulation, because they enable systems at different levels to interact (individual, group, materials, physical space, and so on). However, learning how to regulate these systems successfully requires scaffolding, as it could be detrimental to the learning process if the ability to be successfully self-directed is presupposed (Thomas & Rose, 2019). Regarding self-access centers, Edlin (2016) notes that "users may find themselves relatively lost without any sort of prescription or recommendation [...] it would behoove educators and designers to develop learning environments which allow for some guidance to learners that need it" (p. 119). In evaluating the effectiveness of a self-access center in Hong Kong, Datwani-Choy (2016) found that more human support was needed to improve the quality of learning. Moreover, learners were unclear regarding their language learning objectives. In a formal education setting, a teacher would be expected to make these objectives clear. In the UK, Mar-Molinero and Lewis (2016) discovered that many students struggle to become truly autonomous. The authors found flipped learning to be successful in their intervention. Classroom sessions provided necessary structure, while the learners worked autonomously using an online self-access center. Mar-Molinero and Lewis emphasize the important role of the educator, since resources themselves cannot provide scaffolding and support.

An argument can be made then for bringing elements of successful self-access centers to the classroom, creating a facilitative space. Herrera Cerón and García Gámez (2017) argue that a link must be established between the classroom and the self-access learning center to maximize learning effectiveness. Most notably, they contend that developing self-regulation

is a gradual process that can be aided by a skillful teacher or learning adviser. According to Herrera Cerón and García Gámez, teachers set learning goals and advisers aid students in achieving those goals through materials selection, strategy instruction, and proper planning; “[i]t is the teacher within the classroom setting who is able to make ongoing observations related to students’ participation, exam scores, and homework completion, and can identify students’ weaknesses as a group.” (p. 40). Mayeda, MacKenzie, and Nusplinger (2016) also found success when integrating elements of self-access learning into formal English courses. One main goal was for students to become more autonomous learners. However, when required advising sessions became voluntary, the center experienced a drop from a 24.0% booking rate to just 8.8%. The authors state that it may take multiple sessions for learners to realize the benefit of self-access advising sessions, and many students do not voluntarily invest the time to experience them. Perhaps the regularity of formal classroom meetings could provide the necessary encounters with autonomous learning concepts to develop a habit.

Nakai (2016) argues that learners must be provided with spaces that allow them to “explore the boundaries and possibilities of that space” (p. 168). However, in his study, there were just two self-directed learning sessions for every nine formal language classes, and he attributes much of the early success of the self-directed learning sessions to the scaffolding he provided. The shift to autonomous learning was gradual; yet, the learners were eventually able to exercise autonomy both in a classroom setting and beyond. Horai and Wright (2016) provide solutions for teachers who want to encourage independent learning but do not have access to advisers. The authors believe self-access centers should support both the development of autonomy and the language curriculum. They state that independent learning may be intimidating for students who are used to following a teacher’s lead. Therefore, bringing elements of self-access into the formal classroom could create a smooth transition between the two environments and establish a reciprocal relationship between them. It is important to note that only two students out of thirty in Horai and Wright’s (2016) study continued self-directed learning outside of their required hours as part of their course. So, as with Mayeda et al. (2016) above, integration of self-access elements into the formal classroom and the regular meetings it provides could help to solve these commonly cited setbacks regarding voluntary participation. Of course, we must strike a balance between the level of integration among self-access centers (and/or their characteristics) and formal education settings; too much of one could inhibit the other (Thornton, 2016).

If we acknowledge that simply providing learners with an outfitted space and the freedom to be autonomous may not be enough to ensure effective learning takes place (Benson, 2001), then focusing on spaces in isolation, as I have reported above and in Thomas (2018a, 2018b), may not be enough; a more inclusive view that highlights the interconnectedness of various dynamic elements now seems more appropriate. This shift in focus from purely physical spaces and resources to a view of interrelated systems represents the “in-progress” nature of this work.

Future Directions

Exploring language learning systems

Murray and Lamb (2018) describe a language learning system as “the learners comprised of their various nested systems (cognitive, biological, affective, etc.), their teachers, the materials, the spaces they move across and the places for learning that emerge as they interact with and within these spaces” (p. 258). The authors recommend complexity theory as a theoretical lens through which to view these interrelated systems (see also Murray, 2017, 2018). This could potentially answer some of the questions posed above as we attempt to determine best practices in preparing learners to learn both in and beyond the classroom, in formal and informal environments.

One way to enhance a space beyond its physical characteristics and resources is by examining the strategies students use to learn successfully in that space. This is not new in the self-access literature, as field insiders have praised the use of learning strategies and strategic learning (e.g. Cooker & Torpey, 2004; Hobbs & Dofs, 2016). Much like Murray and Lamb’s (2018) argument for complexity thinking regarding learning spaces and learning systems, the field of learning strategies has begun to move in a similar direction, embracing complexity (e.g. Oxford, 2017; Oxford, Lavine, Amerstorfer, 2018). This view conceptualizes strategies as nested systems, with strategy usage affecting and being affected by individual differences and contextual factors. Because research on both learning spaces and learning strategies is often linked with learner autonomy, there is room for mutually beneficial studies to be conducted. Hurd and Lewis’ (2008) edited volume on language learning strategies in independent settings calls attention to the dearth of research on this area and attempts to fill this gap, a gap that I feel is still present over a decade later. Although my interest is in formal classroom contexts, affordance-rich independent settings, such as self-access centers, offer a wealth of information regarding how a link between self-access and instructed settings can be established. This link is necessitated by my push to bring

independent learning affordances to formal education classrooms in contexts where a separate self-access learning center may not be available. This push for integration brings together the characteristics of the affordance-rich classrooms at the primary level from Thomas (2018a) and Edlin's (2016) principles for self-access learning space design. As I have argued above, solely viewing the space and resources the space contains does little for us in understanding best practices in formal language education where we can expect a teacher to be present. There is a need to establish clearly defined methods for how teachers can best utilize affordance-rich, facilitative spaces—perhaps by scaffolding, monitoring, and assessing strategy usage. There is also a need to change the typically negative view of formal education settings to one that helps to develop learner autonomy and self-regulation, as concepts from strategic learning and formal strategy instruction can enhance learning in truly independent settings.

In Summation

In attempting to investigate classrooms in isolation, assuming that autonomous learning through self-regulation would emerge if the room were outfitted to afford it, a number of potentially important dynamic factors were overlooked. While I still believe in the utility of an affordance-rich, facilitative space, there is a need to develop this idea further by investigating the specific strategies that learners deploy and their sources of strategic behavior and self-/other-regulation (see Thomas & Rose, 2019). In both independent settings (e.g. Edlin, 2016; Hurd & Lewis, 2008) and formal settings (Thomas, 2018a, 2018b), “the ability to self-regulate requires scaffolding” (Mak & Wong, 2018, p. 12), and teachers can play a powerful role in this process. By integrating an informed *other* with *self*-access principles, affordances and effective strategies can be harnessed, and all learners can be prepared to learn autonomously both in and beyond the classroom. Therefore, a facilitative space is one that encompasses all of these aspects, while a debilitative space does not. More research into these complete language learning systems is needed.

Notes on the Contributor

Nathan Thomas is a postgraduate researcher in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. He has researched TESOL in the contexts of China and Thailand, where he has taught for many years. Nathan has published in leading academic journals such as *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Teaching*, *System*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. His interests are wide-

ranging, but current projects pertain to language learning strategies, self-/other-regulation, and English medium instruction.

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