Introducing Community Engagement Pedagogy as a Means to Promote EFL Learners' Conversational Skills in Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract:
Community engagement pedagogy is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates learning by doing in the EFL class to enrich the Language learning process by connecting it to a broader social context. It links students' personal and social development to academic and cognitive development. This article attempts to describe the role of community engagement pedagogy in enhancing EFL students' Speaking and listening comprehension. For data collection, a sample of 16 University club members (N=16) were administered a questionnaire of 14 Items. For analysis purposes, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The results of the study indicated that 72% of the sample advocates for the incorporation of community engagement pedagogies in Algerian universities in general and classrooms in particular. This suggests a strong preference for integrating these pedagogies into academic settings.
Keywords: *Learning, Community Engagement, Higher Education, Conversational skills.*

1. Introduction

In the past several decades, higher education systems around the world have grown appeals to create opportunities for students to serve their community while experiencing real-world challenges outside the classroom. These opportunities provide a clear-point strategy to maximize students' success in life. The concept of community engagement pedagogy has emerged under the heading of experiential education in order to promote the importance of learning by doing. In Algerian higher education in general, and the EFL context in particular, students tend to spend years learning the language. However, by the time they graduate, it becomes difficult for them to converse in English. According to Weinreich (2003), Community engagement in the form of service learning reinforces experientially what

students learn on a cognitive level and enables them to apply their acquired knowledge in a meaningful way. This study explores community engagement as a pedagogy in relation to EFL students' conversational skills. It also targets new emerging concepts of learning beyond sharing information but rather sharing intellectual and spiritual growth. Students' engagement in learning English as a second language may not fully ease the development of their conversational skills (Hooks, 1994).

Community engagement could surface in many shapes. This paper attempts to describe the case of on-campus university Cultural and Scientific Club. To begin with, University Scientific and Cultural Clubs are non-profit organizations that are actively creating their opportunities. Although there is a significant amount of literature on community engagement, most studies do not address its pedagogical aspects in the design and planning fields. Liu (1995) defines community engagement as a way of teaching and learning that narrows the gap between abstraction and circumstance, between theory and practice, between knowing and doing, between the knower and the known. The context in which the learning takes place makes a vital impact on EFL students' language skills. With reference to the LMD system implemented in 2004 which seeks to shift to a student's-centered approach. In this research, we endeavor to introduce a new pedagogy to teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Bouzid & Hammoudi (2019) argued that students need to participate in extracurricular activities to enhance their opportunities for improving speaking skills and listening comprehension. These activities also offer stress-free environments where they can use the language without any negative psychological barriers.

Lisman (2006) argues that knowledge is not discovered by penetrating the objective essence of reality and simply representing it accurately; instead, it is created through conversation in which persons with interests and needs attempt to justify knowledge claims in a language with particular norms and meanings. Lisman (2006) also adds that what counts as knowledge is understood as a function of conversation and its standards of justification. To explain the above, the ability to converse skillfully does not only include knowing the rules of conversation, studying oral communication and enriching vocabulary. It is rather preparing students to engage within themselves and the world in various speaking and listening comprehension situations.

2. Methodology

2.1. **Research Questions**

1. What is the significance of community engagement in EFL context?
2. How could community engagement pedagogy relate to conversational skills?
3. To which extent could community engagement pedagogy enhance learners' conversational skills?

2.2. **Sample**

This study was conducted with sixteen (N=16) students from the Department of English Language and Literature at Mustafa Benboulaid University, Batna2 -Algeria. The participants are also Club members at the Talented Algerian Students Club (TASC).

2.3. **Procedure**

One of the major aims of this research is to explore and discover the impact of community engagement pedagogy on EFL learners' conversational skills. With this aim in mind, we opted for use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to tackle the problem in hand from both angles. The research design attempts to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. In addition to inquiring an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions and thoughts.

As previously mentioned, a total sample of sixteen participants were administered an online questionnaire designed via google form. The participants had to answer fourteen items to collect data on three main headings: Participants' background information, English learning experience and Conversational skills. The results were tabulated and descriptively analysed.

3. Results and Discussion

The reason behind the assembly of demographic data in the first section of the questionnaire is to collect statistical data about the characteristics of our population and to frame the results to the target sample. In our case, students were asked about their age and their level.

As shown in the two graphics (Figure 1 and 2), our sample is a variety of MA and BA students aged between Twenty-One and Twenty-Four years old.
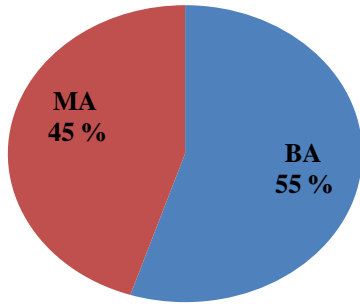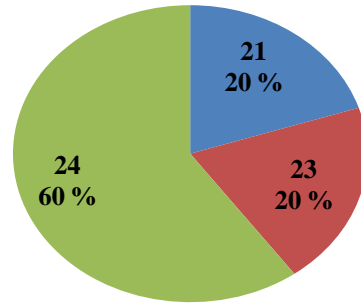
Fig 1. Level

Figu 2. Age

As identified by the data collection in the second section of the questionnaire, EFL students were asked to mention some of the challenges they usually encounter when they express their thoughts in English. As far as the qualitative results are concerned, the majority of students stated that when they speak in English, sometimes they think about it later, and they believe that it wasn't as fluent and as admissible as it sounded in their minds. One of the participants added that this challenge would more likely occur when they are having a real-time one-on-one conversation. Furthermore, we documented that participants are attempting to cope with English in a none-native context where it is only used in an academic setting. As heighted by the participants: "We try to cope with the Algerian culture and use English at the same time. It's difficult when we don't practice on a daily basis". When asking students about their in-classroom experience, we targeted techniques used by teachers in classroom. In this regard, students agreed that the majority of teachers use traditional techniques that might not suit all students. They also stated: "Our teachers usually use the traditional way of teaching, they talk, and we listen and take notes. The interaction is missing". Among many techniques, the participants mentioned the following:

1. Data show
2. Oral presentations
3. Group-work
4. Lectures

As far as these techniques are concerned, we enquired of students if they believed that the techniques, they previously mentioned, help students communicate better English. As seen in Figure 3, 60% of the students believe that these techniques are not helping students communicate better.

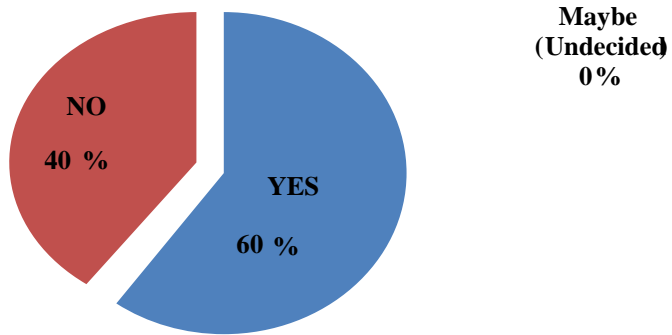Whereas, the other 40% think that the techniques are useful for their communications.

Fig 3. Usefulness of Teachers' Techniques

When asking students about the use of English outside the classroom, the results indicated in figure 4 below show that 50% of the participants do not use English beyond the classroom walls. However, 50% tend to use it outside the classroom. As a follow up question, the participants who answered 'No' were asked about what prevents them from using outside the classroom. The answers replicate what student encounter on a daily basis. As it seems, students tend worry about the reaction of society and students from other branches. They also argued that those who communicate through English, apart from friends and classmate do not have any other place to get together.
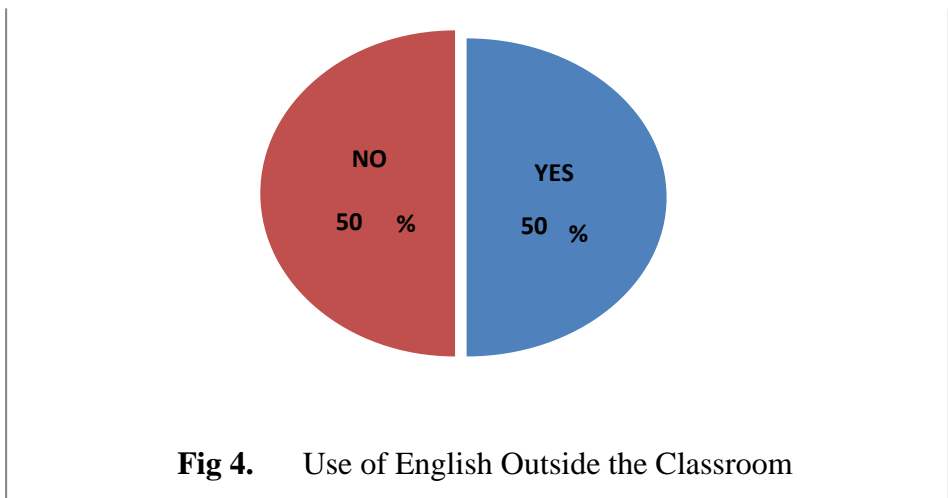

Fig 4. Use of English Outside the Classroom

The third section of the questionnaire targets precisely students' conversational skills in relation to community engagement pedagogy. Figure 5 bellow reveals the overall rating of students' conversational skills. As shown, the majority of students 80% rated their conversational skills as in need of improvement. The other 40% believed that they are competent conversationalists.
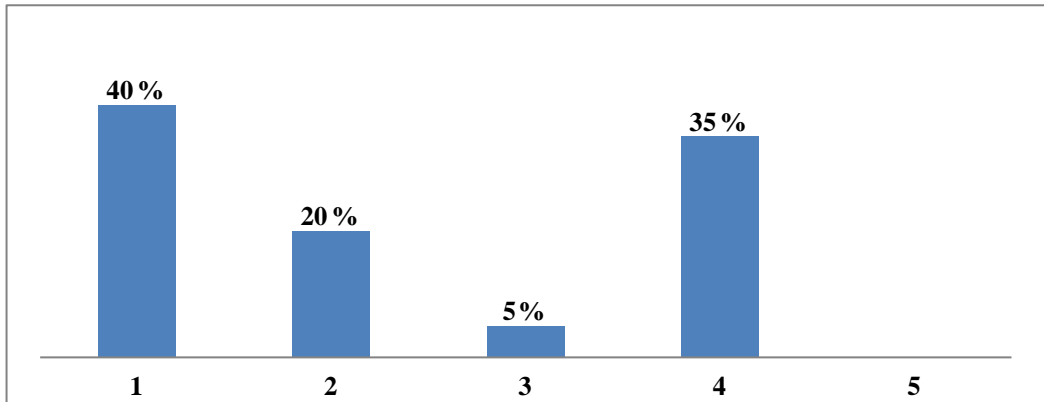

Fig 5. Conversational Skills Rate

In order to target students' awareness of community engagement pedagogy, we asked students if they were familiar with the term. 60% of our participants are familiar with the term. However, 20% are believed to have no clue about community engagement pedagogy. The other 20% have
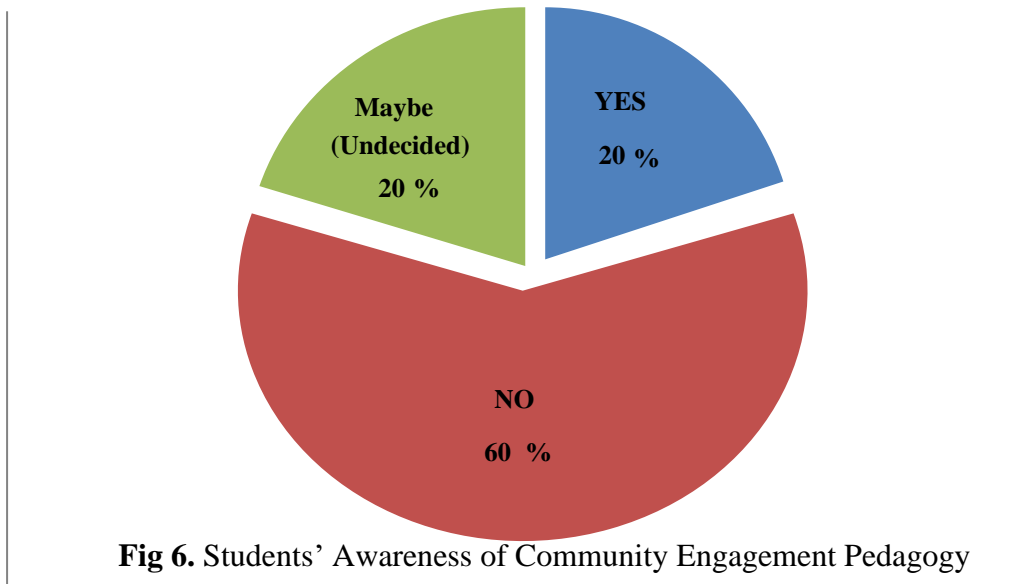

Fig 6. Students' Awareness of Community Engagement Pedagogy

left undecided responses towards service learning. The results are indicated in Figure 6.

Community engagement pedagogy as defined in the short review above bridges knowledge (what is learned) with human context. In this research, students were asked if they have been engaged in any civic community activities outside the university. Taking into consideration that our sample are club members, they all 100% did participate in different activities off campus. We also asked students to mention the activities they engaged in as both club members and EFL students. Students frequently mentioned their involvement in organizing and participating in social and cultural events such as: Hashtag Batna, Sharikna Ramadan, Kids Show and other events in collaboration with private schools. On the other hand, Students were asked if the university provides similar activities. Figure 7 provides a clear understanding of students' responses. 70% of our sample agrees that the university does not provide similar engagement activities, whereas 30% argues that it does.

Fig 7. Community Engagement Activities in Relation to the University
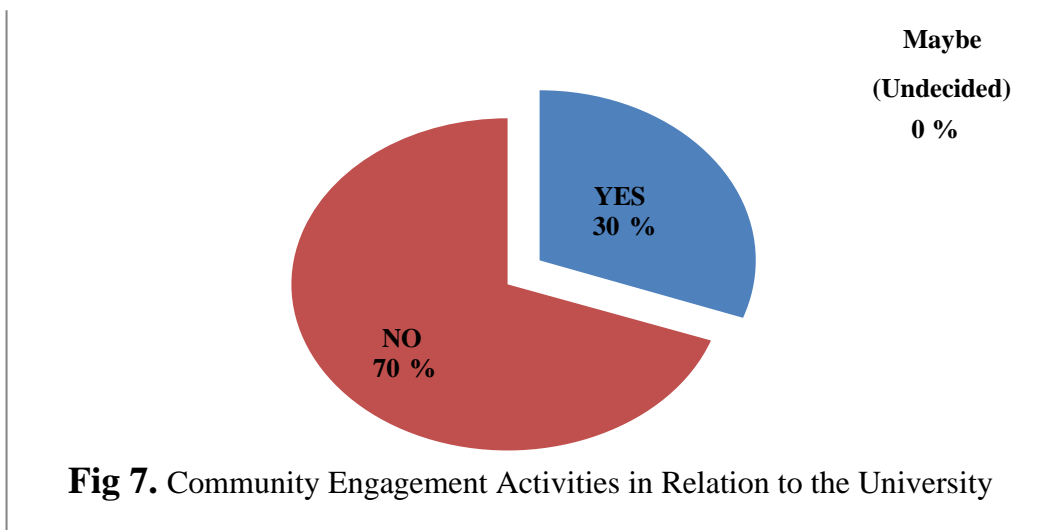
Moreover, we asked students whether or not they support the implementation of community engagement activities within the Algerian Universities. 72% of participants favor such activities ought to be integrated into higher education. Students agree with the fact that these activities would help students improve their speaking and listening skills. It also provides a positive impact on both the students and the university socially and professionally. With this in mind, students stated that those activities would help shape their mindset on how to act/react as individuals in a given context. In addition, it helps

create a platform for all speakers of English in a given university to communicate and converse actively.

4. Recommendations and Suggestions

The framework of community engagement pedagogy captures both the contribution of the individual and the community. It works for the inclusion of competencies beyond us as academics but also the competence of others in communities. In this article, community engagement is introduced as an emerging pedagogy in higher education. Community engagement pedagogy is the dynamic tension between the human need to cultivate an autonomous identity and the desire to be part of a larger reality (Van der Ryn, 2007). In this respect, Van der Ryn (2007) adds that thinking and acting well are not naturally conjoined; we have to work to bring them together. The question then becomes: what role does or should higher education play in the process of cultivating good thinking and action in our students and in ourselves? In this way, community engagement pedagogy encourages EFL student to work side by side with teacher and faculty staff in order to achieve personal, academic and civic growth.

A fast-growing literature on learning by doing sheds light on potential opportunities and challenges students come across on a daily basis. In English language context, educators are no longer pursuing language as a complex phenomenon but rather the role of language in creating globally-minded learners. Hooks (1994) shaped engaged pedagogy as a more demanding approach than the conventional approaches. He claims that it emphasizes on "well-being", that is to say, teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.

The findings showed that students are eager to shift their learning from theory to practice. They supported the integration of the pedagogy in higher education despite the apparent challenges that would face students, faculty and the communities. Recent research indicates that community engagement pedagogy requires the faculty and higher education institutions to provide opportunities for students. By doing so, students will be encouraged to develop skills and understand the value of life-long learning. According to Sacks as cited in Shafei (2018), each academic institution (school or university) is advised to integrate the suggested community-based outreach pedagogy as a vital part in every course's curriculum, "the organization of interaction through which the learning is largely done". Furthermore, the implementation of this pedagogy in higher education would create the

appropriate environment for learners to practice their language, to communicate with new people and to interact in different subjects. By doing so, students will be applying the language they learned in the real world.

In the line with previous studies and research findings, community engagement pedagogy demonstrated a positive impact of students beyond expected. It doesn't only influence EFL students' conversational skill, but also generates a greater sense of personal efficacy and interpersonal skill. By engaging students in community pedagogy, they become active members of the society. The pedagogy shapes students' involvement in community service by strengthening their relationship with the faculty and university.

5. Conclusion

Community engagement pedagogy plays an effective role in constructing EFL learners' language skills. According to students, their participation outside the university is integral for the development of their conversational skills. The research questions tackled in this study provides a new vision of teaching and learning. Scholars give much attention to placing the appropriate approach in a larger picture to serve ESL. In our case, we attempt to provide students with opportunities at the university to practice their conversational skills. The results indicate a significant gap between the English language and the practice of the English language within the Algerian university. A similar gap exists between the university and the community. In this respect, community engagement pedagogy proves to hold positive impact on both students' conversational skills and higher education institutes. Finally, community engagement pedagogy would make a great asset for students understanding the value of their self-efficacy while also their collective strength by living beyond their own.

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