A Showcase of Authentic Learning Activities in an English as a Foreign Language Class[i]

Martha NandariSantoso
martha.nandari@staff.uksw.edu
Faculty of Language and Arts
Universitas Kristen SatyaWacana
Salatiga, Indonesia

Abstract

One of the major constraints of the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) is the deficient opportunities to apply the lessons students learn in the classroom in a meaningful context. Students may have a lot of knowledge about the language but may not be able to apply the knowledge in real life communication. Students who study EFL inconventional classrooms will suffer the most.This article discusses a practical framework for teachers of EFL who would like to alter their traditional classes, which mostly happen in the classroom, to authentic learning activities or activities that promote real-life applications of knowledge, which happen in real-world situations. I showcased in detail the implementation of the framework in one EFL course at the English Education Program of a private university in Indonesia. I also discussed the drawbacks, possible solutions as well as the pedagogical implications with some students' excerpts of their reflectionstoward the activities to support the discussion.

Keywords: Authentic learning; English as a Foreign Language class

Introduction

Learners who study English in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, a setting where people do not use English as a medium for communication outside the classroom, are challenged by the fact that they may not have sufficient opportunity to apply the language lessons they learn in the classroom in a meaningful real-life situation communication and that the lessons they have in the classroom may lack authenticity (Ozverir, Herrington, & Osam, 2016).Lessons in the classroom which do provide enough context may result in students being knowledgeable about the target language, but unable to use it in real life situations (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Ozverir, Osam, & Herrington, 2017).Real life communication may have many kinds of linguistic structures in many different situations which are likely to be new and different from the structured practices they experience in the classroom (Ozverir et al., 2016; Ozverir et al., 2017).

One important solution is by providing activities or simulations that resemble real-life problems and situations known as authentic learning, that is a learning approach that develops "authentic tasks--real-world problems and simulations that are closely related to the field under study" (Nicaise, Gibney, & Crane, 2000, p.80). With authentic learning, students are enabled to have learning activities that bridge the

distance between classroom and reality (Ozverir et al., 2017).

This article describes the principles of authentic learning and the implementation of the principles in one EFL class called: Speaking for Social Purposes (SFSP) which was conducted ata private university in Indonesia. The discussion covers theories of authentic learning, examples of authentic learning employed in SFSP, how the activities used in SFSP class mirror the major characteristics of authentic learning, the drawbacks encountered, and the possible solutions. I also provided some students' excerpts from their reflections to support the discussion. The article loses with the summary of the main ideas, and some thoughts on the pedagogical implications.

What is Authentic Learning?

The notion of authenticity based on Doyle cited in Andersson and Andersson (2004) can be seen from three dimensions: the learners, the subject and the "situated learning". For the learners, authenticity means we have to emphasize the needs and perspectives of the learners. Learners must find the learning useful for their real life. From the subject, it means that the activities must be in line with what the students' actual learning,and from the "situated learning" the learning must be in a context where activities are just like the practice in real situations.

In essence, there are some principles of authentic learning activities. One important principle is that they must relate to real-world situations (Diamond, Middleton, & Mather, 2011; Lombardi, 2007; Nicaise et al., 2000; Rule, 2006).Brown et al. (1989) describe authentic activities in explicit teaching and learning situations as those resembling activities practiced by people in the real world beyond the classroom, but the aspects that would obstruct the learners from learning are eliminated. Rule (2006) as a *Journal of Authentic Learning* editor whoanalyzed 45 journal articles that exemplify the use of authentic learning in various disciplines, concludes in her analysis that authentic learning involves problems of real-life situation, continuous inquiry, and thinking skills, interactions with a learning community beyond the classroom and learners taking initiatives of their learning. She explains further that "the community of learners who scaffold learning for each other during discussions along with the audience beyond those learners who set the context for the problem both form important components of authentic learning" (p.6).

Some researchers also discussed other dimensions of authentic learning. Lave and Winger (1991) argue authentic learning activities as learning activities that are done by students within real communities of practice. Learning happens as students learn from the more expert members in the community. In other words, learning is through practice rather than from instructional teaching. This view is in line with the views of Heath and McLaughlin (1994, p.487) who regard an authentic learning activity as "learning from experience." In another research, this is called the process of discovery in authentic learning activities (Schank, 1994). Lombardi (2007) and Nicaise et al.(2000) add that the aspect of collaborative learning among the students,

mentors and the community should be present in authentic learning activities. Authentic learning activities happen in situations when there is an encounter between the students' situated experience and the disciplinary intentions supervised by a more knowledgeable and skilled member who practices the activity in genuine real-life situations (Mims, 2003; Tonchon, 2000). In this sense, it is important to have the presence of more expert members in the relevant fieldto provide insights to the students in doing the authentic learning activities. Heath and McLaughlin (1994, p.485) however, argue that "cross-age communities of practice enhance everyone's role since everyone has an opportunity to be both apprentice and expert, teacher and learner." So, in this perspective, within a community of learners, not only could the juniors learn from the seniors, but the seniors could also learn from the juniors.

Fitzsimmons and Lanphar(2011) put forward the importance of emotional attachment in the students learning which the two authors believe to be present in authentic learning activities. The two authors further mention that when the students feel good about what they are doing, it will lead them to explore new things and gain new abilities. Problem-solving skills are also trained during the implementation of authentic learning activities (Risko, Osterman, &Schusster, cited in Kocyigit, &Cembat, 2013).

Two major activities employed

The Afternoon Soiree (AS). A soiree is a fancy evening party (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The afternoon soiree that is a fancy party conducted in the afternoon was basically a Role Play and simulation – an activity that is considered to be activities included in authentic learning (Diamond, Middleton, &Mather, 2011). The people involved in this activity were all the students taking the SFSP class (a hundred and ten students), committee members who consisted of the more senior students who had taken this class before (twenty senior students) and all their lecturers (eight lecturers).

Figure 1. The Afternoon Soiree

Students were given a role as a famous person in the world of their own choice. Then students did a literature review about the famous person, studied the personality, collected properties as usually were worn or that marked the personality they played, practiced their role with feedback from their friends as they were reviewing the language functions they had learned in the classroom. The eight lecturers did the same preparing themselves as famous people for they would altogether with the students participate in the party.

The Event Organizers (EOs) were their seniors who had taken the course before. The EOs would prepare the venue, the refreshment, the invitation cards, the decoration,and properties needed. They also prepared a task card for every student. The task card containedwhat each student had to do during the party, such as whom to find and talk to. Several senior students were prepared to function as police officers who would give a fine to the students who were found speaking in languages other than English.

On the D-day, students who consisted of all students in six parallel classes totally about a hundred and ten students came, and all dressed up just like the personality they had to play. Each student represented a famous person familiar to the students. They had to first of all register themselves at the registration desks attended by their seniors. As they were supposed to find and talk to a particular person as his/her task card said, they had to be active introducing, greeting and talking one another. They were engaged in this activity for about three hours. During the party, the committee members who were their seniors and who had passed this course before, also took part conversing with them while serving snacks and drinks. The lecturers who also dressed up as famous persons took part in the party, andhad chats with the students as they also participated fully in the party. (See Fig. 1).

The English Funfair (EF). The English Funfair was a bigger authentic learning activity which needed four to six weeks of preparation. Students had booths to display what they would sell. The audience came from the surrounding community including the lecturers, school students and their English teachers, senior students from the English Language Education Program, and students from various other departments. Since the EF was a final project, this was the time when students could apply all the lessons they had learned in the classroom and outside the classroom throughout the semester.

The preparation of the EF took about six weeks. Students were informed about the EF at the beginning of the course and six weeks before the actual event they were divided into groups of five where they would work together to think about a theme and create activities or produce something related to their theme to sell to the audience during the EF. Students, lecturers and the senior students who served as the committee, planned the setting and layout of the EF which took place in the open space in the university area. They also made the budget, prepared the properties needed such as tents, tables, chairs, a stage with the sound system, tickets for the audience, promoted the event to the school students and English teachers in town and two weeks before the D-day, they would start selling tickets to their friends and the surrounding community. As a promotional tool, some English school teachers were given some free tickets to spend in the EF. A

student group band was also prepared to play during the EF. In this event, several senior students were also prepared to function as

police officers who would give a fine to the students who were found speaking in languages other than English.

Figure 2. The English Funfair

During the actual performance, there were twenty-two groups of students. Each grouphad a booth to display their products. They decorated their booth according to their theme. Some had a photo booth for the audience to take pictures, some provided games for the audience to play, and various snacks and drinks for sale. Students from this class as well as from the other classes were engaged talking as they were visiting their booths, buying snacks and drinks or playing their games. Audiences did not only consist of students but also their lecturers, school English teachers, and the community in nearby places. (See Figure 2).

Authenticity Principles, Drawbacks and Possible Solutions

This section discusses in what way the AS and EF described above mirrored the major characteristics of authentic learning activities, the drawbacks encountered, and the possible solutions. I provided some excerpts of the students' reflections to support the discussion. The students' reflections on the SFSP class were in a form of digital video recording, and they were submitted at the end of the semester. However, since the students had to reflect on the whole SFSP materials and class activities in about five minutes in the digital video recording, they could not say much about the AS and EF. So afterward, I also asked the students to voluntarilywrite reflections in Indonesian specifically on the two authentic activities they had: The Afternoon Soiree and the English Funfair. Five students out of sixteen students in my class submitted their written reflections on the AS and EF. I used the excerpts of the students' writtenreflections that I translated in English to support the discussion in this paper. I used initials of the students' names in the excerpts.

Authenticity principles in the AS and EF

Real-world relevance. Unlike in-classrole-playing, where students plan a party

that is never done or give a direction in a city that does not exist (Littlewood, 2011) the AS and the EF were real. The students planned, made a budget, prepared all the properties, and did attend a party. They conducted a real funfair, which was attended by real audience, who used the targetlanguage for real transactions and communication. Tasks that have real-world relevance are said to be one important element of authentic activities (Doyle, cited in Andersson&Andersson., 2004; Lombardi, 2007; Mather, 2011; Rule, 2006). Students of SFSP practiced speaking in English outside the classroom, in a real life situation with a lot of people including foreigners during the AS and EF. The activity provided a life situation for the students to apply the knowledge or lessons they had received or practiced in the classroom, but this time the practice was not structured as the ones they had in the classroom, but many would come up as new, unpredictable situations just like they are in genuine communication in real life. For example, one student commented:In the classroom, we practiced speaking in English with our friends only, but in the EF, we communicated with a lot of people including foreigners, in situations that were different from the ones in the classroom. (Reflection, Student TVW).

Usefulness

Another important element of authentic learning activities is their usefulness; whether or not students find the activities meaningful for their life and in line with their actual learning (Doyle, cited in Andersson&Andersson, 2004). The AS and EF were forums where students had the opportunities to use English in a meaningful way. During the preparation and during the

actual event which lasted for six weeks, students used English for meaningful communication with their friends, lecturers and their senior students who served as their EOs. They also used emails and WhatsApp group for quite intense communication as they were preparing the EF. One student mentioned the value of the activities because outside the classroom they were not usually able to use English for English is a foreign language in Indonesia.

We do not live in a community who speak English, so the activities increased my speaking opportunities. (Reflection, Student YO).

Involving the community and more knowledgeable people

The involvement of the community and more knowledgeable people is one of the important elements in authentic learning activities (Tonchon, 2000). The presence of the lecturers, the expatriates in town, the school English teachers, the senior students, and the community in the surrounding area, all constitute the involvement of the learning community and more expert people. They helped scaffold one another. Students were challenged to speak with the more proficient speakers (the lecturers, the senior students, the school English teachers, and the expatriates) as well as the less proficient speakers (the surrounding community who might speak very limited English). In one hand students were engaged in a more sophisticated communication, and on the other hand, they would need to use speaking strategies to get their meaning across to the less proficient speakers. This experience enabled them to experiment and to construct knowledge by themselves (Mehlinger, cited in Kocyigit and Zembat, 2013). The uses of

simplified language and gestures or facial expressions are two speaking strategies that are useful for speaking especially between people of different language proficiencies (Carbrera& Martinez, 2001). From experience, students may experiment and be aware that in the actual communication, people need to use strategies to understand and to be understood. Two students mentioned strategies they used, "*I had to speak very simple English when speaking with children whose English was still limited.*" (Reflection, Student MP).

"*I was rather nervous when I spoke to the more senior people, and suddenly I could not remember the appropriate vocabulary to continue my sentence. In that situation, I used gestures to explain what I meant.*"(Reflection, Student KCT).

The involvement of the senior students, lecturers and the community, including some foreigners in the town as a community of learning made learning enriched.   Two students mentioned, "*Speaking with the lecturers and senior students encouraged me to improve my English.*" (Reflection, Student AP).

I gained new vocabularies when speaking with the lecturers and senior students (Reflection, Student TVW)

With this experience, there was a learning process through discovery (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; Schank, 1994). This experience has opened their horizon to continue to inquire more and more and to study more and more which is another aspect of authentic learning (Rule, 2006).For example, two students commented, "*I realized that I have to improve my pronunciation.*" (Reflection, Student MP)

Some people didn't understand what I said. I think it was because of my bad grammar. (Reflection, Student TVW).

Collaborative learning

To succeed in the course as well as to succeed in real life situations, people need to work with other people (Lombardi, 2007). In doing the AS and EF students surely needed collaborative learning with their working group as well as with their lecturers and senior students who helped them as EOs. Collaborative learning is an integral part of the activities.

Affective learning

An important part of authentic learning activities is the enjoyment in doing them. When students enjoy their learning, they will be motivated to do and explore more which results in their capability building (Fitzsimmons &Lanphar, 2011). The AS and EF seemed to be interesting for the students of SFSP. For example, one student suggested the same activities be conducted for the junior students, "*The activities were interesting; they were not boring, and I recommend these activities again for the junior students.*" (Reflection, Student KCT).

Other Language Skills and Soft Skills

The use of authentic learning activities enables students to learn many other skills including soft skills. During the AS and EF, students practiced speaking and at the same time listening. One student indicated, "*I used my listening skills in these activities.* (Reflection, Student YO).

Two students mentioned that she also learned grammar such as in the following excerpts, "*Besides speaking, I also learn how to use the appropriate grammar.*" (Reflection, Student KCT).*"I learned how to apply the appropriate grammar, especially when*

speaking to foreigners. When I spoke to them, and my grammar was messy, they did not understand me." (Reflection, Student TVW).

Besides listening and grammar, students seemed to learn vocabulary as well. Two students indicated, "*When senior students and the lecturers came, I learned new vocabulary.*" (Reflection, Student TVW). "*Besides speaking, I practiced) vocabulary.*" (Reflection, Student AP).

Students' engagement in the activities also built their soft skills. Speaking with a variety of people during the AS and EF in a relatively relaxed and informal setting such as in the AS and EF seemed to improve their confidence.For example, one student said, "*I had to have the courage to speak with confidence to the people, although I did not know them yet or (although) they had better English than me.* (Reflection, Student KCT).

When preparing the AS and EF, students who worked in groups as well as with the senior students who served as the EOs, gave the students more practice in developing their teamwork skills. Students mentioned that their teamwork developed such as in the following excerpts, "*Other skills I learned from the activities were ... and teamwork.*" (Reflection, Student MP). "*When we had to prepare the EF, the task trained us to work well in a team. We divided the job, without thinking about who did more or who did less.*" (Reflection, Student TVW).

During the activity, students were conditioned to develop their entrepreneurship skills as well. They tried hard to make something to sell. Many students made attractive snacks and drinks with unique names such as 'tofu island', 'banana o'nana', 'belly's charger' and various games to play. Almost all the stalls were sold out, and the students made some profits. One student indicated: "*I developed my entrepreneurship skills to make money. My team and I thought hard to make our booth attractive for the visitors.*" (Reflection, Student MP).

The activities also gave them some practice on time management. One student stated, "*My problem was with time. Fortunately, all friends helped, and we managed to do things on time.*" (Reflection, Student YO)

The drawbacks and solutions

What to sell.

One of the difficulties in conducting the AS and EF for the students was that they had to think creatively to prepare the content of the activities. One student mentioned her difficulty in 'what to sell' in the EF and the solution her group had made. "*I found difficulties in preparing what to display and sell in the fair. My team solution was to make simple snacks and drinks from bananas that we could make by ourselves.*" (Reflection, Student KCT).

Dealing with the properties

Besides the content of the activity, students had to prepare the properties as well, and this seemed to be one of the difficulties as well. For example, one student mentioned her difficulty in preparing the properties to wear for the character that she had to play during the AS by saying, "*When I prepared the AS, I didn't know what properties I had to wear for the character that I would play.*" (Reflection, Student TVW).But in fact, what the students wore did not affect their performance. So this aspect was not emphasized in the activity.

Dealing with lazy students

One of the weaknesses in group work is that sometimes there are students who do not contribute enough for the task. One student mentioned her difficulty working with one of their friends in the group as he/she did not want to work hard, "*My difficulty was when one of my friends did not want to work hard so that I had to work harder to complete the task.*" (Reflection, Student YO).For such a problem, I provided a peer evaluation sheet for every member of the group to evaluate their friends' participation. The peer evaluation was on a scale of 1-3. A student was scored one by their friends in the group if he/she showed very little participation, two for enough participation and three for full participation. In this way, equal participation from each group member was encouraged.

Marketing Skills

To succeed in the EF, students also need marketing skills. If a few people only visited their booths, they might lose some money. This challenge was considered positive, though rather than negative because they would try hard to be creative. Some students gave free food samples to the audience, some gave a bonus to those who bought more than one piece, and some went round approaching the audiences instead of standing passively near their booths only. For helping the students not to suffer a loss, the faculty prepared some subsidy for each group.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The use of authentic learning activities for EFL learning seems to be enlightening. Two authentic learning activities exemplified in this paper: the Afternoon Soiree where students were engaged in communication in a fancy party,and the English Funfair where students had booths for selling to real customers, have shown more benefits than drawbacks. The two activities reflected real-life situations and were not just planned but were realized in a real party and a real funfair with real participants. During the activities, students had the opportunities to practice speaking in English in a meaningful way just like communication in the real world setting. For students in an EFL setting, where language practice cannot be done outside the classroom or in every-day life, genuine communication such as those in the AS and EF help students apply the language rules they have learned in the classroom, in real life communication. The process seemed to prove to help students construct knowledge through their experiment in applying their language knowledge in many new situations which are likely to be different from the structured practices in the classroom. Besides developing language skills, the AS and EF activities also built the students' confidence, and ability to work in a team, solve problems, manage time, and develop entrepreneurship skills.

One of the weaknesses of group activities like the AS and EF is that there may be 'free-riders' or students who do not work as hard as the others which may cause unfairness to the students. The other weakness of such activities are related to the time and energy needed because, during the planning and preparation, students did not only study and review the English language skills, but they had to prepare the properties, create games or make some refreshments, decorate their booths, make the budget, and other non-linguistic preparation. However, in the end, in fact, through such preparation, students

developed their teamwork, leadership, creativity, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, time management,and money management skills – things that they need in facing real-world problems. So, the benefits still outweigh the complexity of the preparation.

For teachers of English who would like to try authentic learning activities in their EFL classes, without being burdened by the non-linguistic business, they may embed the activities with the extra-curricular activities organized by the student body organization so that the activities may be more time, energy and cost efficient.

Acknowledgment

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