

Simulations in EFL Classroom A Tactic to Improve Communication



Dr. Lamis Fanous

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Balamand- Lebanese University

Abstract

This paper delves into an innovative communicative language learning model, “simulations”, which counteracts the challenges faced in EFL classrooms, where communication using the foreign language is fostered. In an EFL classroom, both teachers and students feel frustration due to the lack of authentic settings where the use of English as a Foreign Language can be promoted. In a simulation-based class, authentic communication settings are considered to be the cornerstone. This paper explores, in detail, the theoretical and empirical dimensions of “simulations” and provides insights about the context and essentials needed for the implementation of the simulation model along with practical examples and suggestions for simulations that can be applied in EFL contexts. This paper concludes with ways to deal with obstacles that may arise when applying this approach to ensure successful implementation of such an innovative strategy in an EFL environment.

Keywords: Simulations, Communication skills, language achievement, classroom application

Introduction

When teaching a language, three broad aims are to be distinguished: the social, the artistic and the philosophical (Kelly, 1969). The first aim deals with language from a social perspective, and considers it to be a social behavior and a type of communication. The second aim, the artistic, depicts language as a means for creativity, which requires the presence and appreciation of the creative activity itself. The third

aim, the philosophical, focuses on analytic techniques (Kelly, 1969, p.396). To achieve the above broad aims of language, specific approaches and methods of teaching were conceived, and among them the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. CLT "highlights the fundamentally communicative properties of language, where classrooms are increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks" and "attempts to go beyond purely grammatical and discourse elements in communication and probe the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language" (Rogers, 2001).

Even though proponents of CLT claim that it has communication as its chief focus, they still take teaching language, rather than teaching how to communicate using a language, as a point of departure. According to Coleman (2002a), there is no language or grammar in the real world. In fact, they exist only in our subjective experience and are not real-world entities (Yngve, 1996; Saussure, 1959). To be able to communicate effectively and efficiently, people should be the objects of learning from the perspective of how they communicate. Therefore, the focus should be on learning how people communicate in a target speech community (Yngve, 2004, p. 17).

According to Savignon (1983), grammatical competence, one of the components of communicative competence in CLT, is the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language and to make use of these features to interpret and to form words and sentences (p. 41). In other words, CLT considers that learners should learn the objects of language so that they can "use" the knowledge of language objects to be able to communicate successfully. On the other hand, the key concept in CLT is communicative competence, which includes knowledge of "what to say and how to say it appropriately based on the situation, the participants, and their roles and intentions" (Ozsevik 2010, p. 27). In an attempt to apply this teaching methodology, teachers focus on teaching language objects and using the language objects, which is misleading. In fact, the idea of "using" the knowledge of language objects is misleading because it treats the objects of language as physical objects that have certain pragmatic function themselves. It is worth noting that language objects themselves, as non-real-world objects, do not have any inherent "pragmatic function" such as containing information and meaning that we make use of. Accordingly, successful communication is not based on knowledge of language objects. In order to be a good communicator in a foreign language, learners need to acquire properties similar to those of native speakers and behave more or less the way native speakers do when using the language.

Taking the different components of communicative competence into consideration, many researchers concerned about EFL teaching and learning have thought out of the box and realized that an efficient way to apply the communicative approach in EFL settings is through using simulation which has

at its core letting go of the conventional classroom methods and approaches and shifting the focus on authentic settings, which allow opportunities of communication in realistic conditions (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003).

Simulations in EFL Learning Context

Simulation was originally used as a learning technique in military training and business (Sam, 1990). Simulation can be defined as the reality of function in a simulated environment (Jones, 1986). In other words, simulation is a structured set of circumstances which mirror real life situations (Sam, 1990). It is the act of stimulating the behavior of a situation or a process by the use of a suitably analogous phenomenon.

Simulations are mainly regarded as a representation of reality that takes place through problem-driven activities. Simulations provide a communicative environment where students get actively engaged, in the form of groups, in a task they have to perform or a problem they have to solve based on predetermined background information and environment. More important, however, is the idea that a simulation becomes reality, and students get actively involved in their roles and the activity they are performing with minimal focus on the environmental details and maximum focus on the language to be produced in that specific real-like context.

The major aspect in a simulation, which is an innate benefit of it, is the fact that it fulfills the student's perceptions and need for realism, which is a desire to "relate to life 'out there' beyond the classroom's box-like walls" (McArthur, 1983, p. 101). This fulfilling of needs, in turn, acts as a motivation for both the students and the teacher, especially in EFL situations where English, at its best, is regarded as a differed need. Simulations dismantle the traditional teacher-student relationship in a way that allows students to be in control and take control of their own performance, leading towards "declass rooming" the class (Jones, 1982). Simulations help the learners immerse in and identify with the target culture. Another advantage of simulations is reducing anxiety levels, which is a key element when it comes to language development (Krashen, 1982).

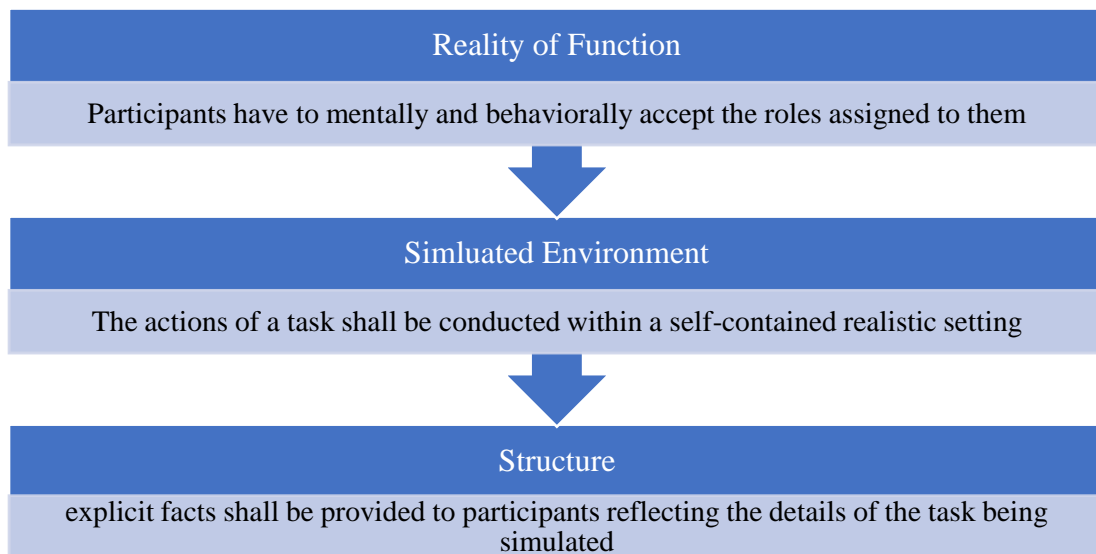
Theoretical Approach

According to Jones (1982), a simulation is as reality of function in a simulated and structured environment (p. 5). Based on this definition, for a simulation to achieve the desired effect, three essential elements need to be fulfilled: Reality of function, simulated environment, and structure. One of the basic constituents of a simulation is reality of function. Accordingly, participants need to fully immerse, mentally and behaviorally, in the function of the simulation in terms of roles and duties (Jones, 1982). Moreover, when given a simulation, participants need to adopt the functional role assigned to them, step into the event,

shape the event, and carry out the relevant duties and responsibilities based on that role. As for the simulated environment, if a simulation has an office in a company as a simulated environment, participants do not go to a real office or a company; however, a simulated environment resembling an office is created inside the classroom by rearranging desks and using some visual aids as props like a laptop or office material, stationary supplies and others. It is worth noting that only the environment is simulated to preserve the reality of function, but the behavior of participants is real. A simulation should be well structured to reflect reality of function and help participants function properly in the simulated environment.

Figure 1

Essential Elements of a Simulation



Simulations vs. Role Play

In many cases, teachers often confuse simulations and role plays as these two strategies share a lot in common. The table below summarizes the major differences between simulations and role play as provided by Bambrough (1994, p.14).

Table 1

Simulation vs. Role Play

Simulation	Role play
Props are a basic element as they present the environment, and this is why they are provided.	Key aspects of the environment shall be created or imagined by the participants.
Detailed representations are presented in terms of facts due to their major importance in the “Functional” part, (E.g., representations of gender, age, job, status, circumstances, etc.).	Participants are provided with descriptions, and they are required to invent key facts or to act based on specific script or description provided, (E.g., “You are angry because....”).
Participants behave as themselves (applying their own background and language experiences to situation).	Participants take part of the character
Participants can use their imagination but they are not allowed to create or add to the given situation	Participants are expected to be creative and imaginative when playing the role
A participant behaves and acts as if found in a real life situation and thus creates a real communication.	A participant acts out a dialogue in a predetermined context or imaginary one

The Benefits of Simulations in EFL Contexts

Simulation can have a significant influence on the way learners act and interact with their classmates and environment throughout the classroom activities. Such actions and interactions in EFL contexts are based on four main constructs including; interest, challenge, choice, and joy (Gentry, Gable, & Rizza, 2002). Each of the latter has a significant association with other student-related issues, such as student involvement (Lee, Yin & Zhang, 2009); self-regulating learning and motivational beliefs (Kharrazi & Kareshki, 2010; Ghanizadeh & Alishahi, 2011); students' goal-orientations (Jahedizadeh, Ghanizadeh, & Ghonsooly, 2016); learning approaches (Ozkal, Tekkaya, Cakiroglu, & Sunsur, 2008), and cognitive strategy use (Young, 1997). Hence, utilizing simulations in EFL settings tackle the four main constructs and leads to:

a- Real communicative activity: A simulation provides learners with ample opportunities to communicate using the target language due to the presence of a major aspect: The reality of function. Jones (1982, p. 9) notes that simulations provide the participants with the mutual need to communicate and the need is inherent

in the activity. Accordingly, participants in simulations communicate naturally according to roles, functions, and duties in order to fulfill the role or solve the problem in simulations. It is worth noting that not all interactive activities that involve speech are communication. To better illustrate, real communication involves real people who demonstrate their personality and thought in the communication whilst discussing real issues. On the other hand, role playing, acting, and even free speech are not considered as real communications because they lack reality of function. The success in simulations is not based on having the conversation done in a right or wrong way according to the teachers' expectation. In simulations, learning is more important than a successful performance; therefore, the failure in communication between participants is as valuable as success. Moreover, not only is communication generated within the simulations but also afterwards through reflection and discussion (Jones, 1982, p. 9).

b- Motivation: Simulations foster purposeful communication rather than artificial communication. Throughout simulations, learners are given the chance to express freely without being restricted to a dialogue. This gives them the opportunity to reflect their character and personal experiences, resulting in higher motivation and interest to express and share.

c- Enhanced fluency: One of the major principles of communicative teaching is that people learn by doing (Allwright, 1984). When in a simulation, learners are required to have immediate communication, which in turn promotes their fluency. In order to convey meaning, learners find themselves focusing on the situation they are in and on the communication taking place. In such setting, the communication of meaning takes over the practice of language, including elements of grammar and pronunciations. In simulations, the use of language is considered as a necessary aspect of the communication to have it occur and not as a test of correctness.

d- Integration of skills: Littlewood (1981) stresses that communicative language teaching is a "whole-task practice" (p. 17). Taking the latter into consideration, it can be noted that simulations in language learning utilize a range of language skills in realistic situations. They are considered as a medium that promotes the learning of the pragmatic aspects of the foreign language, non-verbal skills, and intercultural and interpersonal competence as well as the development of a range of cognitive skills including critical thinking, analyzing and evaluating. Simply, simulations put the pieces of the puzzle together by showing that successful communication is the result of a blend of skills.

e- Reduced anxiety: In simulations, the roles of teachers and students are shifted. Learning becomes student-centered as teachers act as supervisors who monitor the process. In such atmosphere, learners feel less stressed and the anxiety associated in the learning process is reduced. Moreover, learners do not feel the

stress imposed from error correction or judgments which results in more self confidence and better levels of achievement on the long run (Thompson, 1992).

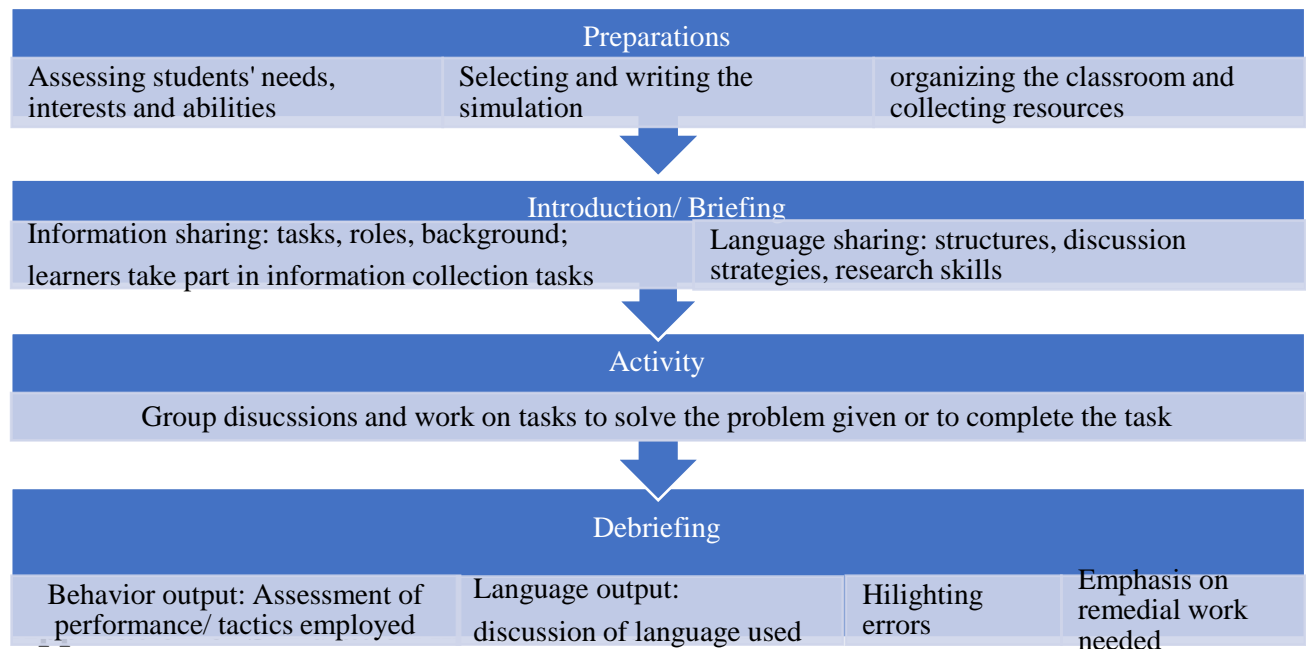
Empirical Approach

Stages of Simulation Design and Preparation

The structure of a simulation consists of four parts: Preparation, introduction, activity, and debriefing (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, Pawlak, & Bielak, 2017).

Figure 2

The Structure of a Simulation



Simulations can be used in the classroom to cover a wide range of topics and functions. Since the objective of language learners vary, simulations, in turn, vary. Not every simulation can be applied at any proficiency level; this is why teachers shall differentiate between the types of simulations suitable and applicable for each level: basic, intermediate, and advanced.

Basic Level

A lot of teachers think twice before they take the initiative to integrate simulations in their language classes for basic level learners as they believe that the process is complex and will not yield, in return, the needed outcomes. One cannot deny that learners at this level do not have good command of the language, especially the communicative ability of it; however, if provided with comprehensible input, learners can perform beyond any expectation.

Simulations for basic level classes should be straight forward since learners at this level have a narrow range of skills which allow them to communicate. Therefore, straight forward simulations that learners encounter in their daily routine such as greeting people, asking for directions, ordering food at a restaurant, etc. are recommended. To insure the success of simulations at this delicate level of language knowledge, comprehensible input that matches real life shall be provided so that learners can participate successfully in the simulation.

Practical example

This sample simulation is about asking directions. In the briefing stage, the teacher provides comprehensible input about the meaning of basic elements needed for this activity such as directions to reach a street, expressions that reflect movements a person can take to arrive to a destination, gambits that lead to the repetition of a word or a direction and others. These elements can be provided by showing learners visuals such as pictures or video clips.

After briefing, the teacher asks the learners to sit in pairs and provides them with task cards. The teacher explains about the roles and tasks to be applied. Then, the teacher gives learners different maps. For example, the first learners, named as learner 1, will be given a map that includes pictures of buildings and names of several shops, centers, service places and other mark points on it, and the second learner, named as learner 2, will have a map with pictures of these places but with no names along with the list of destinations. A marker in the form of a small car or a man will be given to learner 2. The teacher guides the learners to the starting point on the map.

Learner 2 has to communicate with learner 1 and ask him/her for directions, and learner 1 has to give the directions needed. As a practical example, learner 2 can ask learner 1 “Excuse me, where is XYZ hospital?”, and learner 1 answers, “Go one block and turn right to XYZ road...then go three blocks, you will find it on your left.” After listening to the directions of learner 1, learner 2 moves the marker to the destination as per the directions of learner 1 and stops at the right places. In case learner 2 gets mixed up or forgets the directions, he/she may stop and ask to get the directions to the target destination following the same protocol but through initiating a new conversation, as if he/she meets a new person on the road and asks for directions. In such case, learner 1 shall give new directions based on the new start point that learner 2 reached. Throughout the activity, learner 2 is not allowed to check the details present on the map of learner 1 before he/she actually arrives to it so that the activity sounds realistic since we can never see a destination in real life until we arrive to it.

At this level of language knowledge, learners tend to refer back to their teacher whenever they feel unable to move forward with the activity as they do not know what word to use or what the name of an element is. However, the teacher shall remind the learners that in such simulation, she/he no more has the role of a teacher and accordingly shall advise them to refer to other learners who are also taking part in the simulation to ask for assistance and negotiate meanings.

Intermediate level

At this level of language proficiency, learners possess language abilities that allow them to participate in more complicated simulations than beginner level participants. Thus, the teacher can implement situations that any person might face in real life such as being a doctor who has to give a prescription to a sick person, being a graduate who has to go through a job interview, or being an employee who has to take a certain decision at a company.

For such kind of real-life simulations, the teachers can set the simulation in the form of a scenario, which clearly explains the situation the learners are facing, their roles, tasks, the way they are expected to behave throughout the simulation and the output that they shall come up with at its end. According to Jones (1982, p. 34), the controller should provide enough information for the participants to understand what is involved in the briefing stage and ensure that all required documents are present. It is worth noting that teacher shall stress on the importance of each role, and the importance of accepting it, in addition to the fact that learners shall not play or act, but shall behave as per their role in the simulation.

Practical example

The teacher divides the class into groups each consisting of 4 or 5 learners so that the final number of groups is even. An instructions paper, the scenario, is then distributed for each team so that members can have sufficient information about their roles and tasks and what is expected from them in this simulation. In this real life-like simulation, each group resembles a company specialized in selling origami papers with instructions, the target market of these origami papers are children. When following the instructions, children end up having a variety of designs and characters out of the papers. Each group, being an origami paper company, is given a label such as the A company, the B company, or even the teacher can give learners the opportunity to choose their own company names. Each learner shall wear a tag name that specifies his/her role at the company, such as marketing director, creative team manager, technical assistant and other, and learners shall behave and act based on these roles.

After sharing the scenario, each company is given 5 papers. Three of these papers shall be used by the learners to make a creative origami shape or design out of it (for example a candy box, a dragon, a car);

one paper shall be used to list the instructions to be followed to get the creative shape, and one paper shall be used to write a business letter on it. The business letter shall follow a certain format previously explained by the teacher. Each two groups exchange the business letters and the instructions, and try to follow the instructions of the other company to check if they were accurate enough in their instructions. Companies use the first paper to write a letter back to the collaborating company commenting on the instructions and the design. As a final step, both companies set a meeting and discuss the final design to be applied.

Throughout the simulation, the teacher takes the role of an observer only. He/she can move around taking notes about learners' error and weaknesses to be shared with them in the debriefing stage. As an assessment, learners can write an essay describing their experience in the origami company in terms of group work and cooperation, autonomous learning, and the reflection on the simulation as a whole. During the debriefing part, the teacher can point out the points of strength and weakness each learner had. In other words, the teacher can comment on the verbal and non-verbal skills in terms of language use and communication aside to group work and interaction.

Advanced level

Although learners at this stage do not have a proficiency level that matches that of native speakers of the language, yet they are able to communicate successfully in most real-life situations they encounter. The choice of simulations at this level has no limitations as the teacher can adapt any real-life situation and adopt it to its class, as long as this simulation can add to the learners' knowledge of language and move them a step forward in mastering it.

Practical example

In the briefing stage, the teacher sets the frame of the simulation by explaining the scenario in the form of a paragraph to be distributed for each and every learner. The scenario states that there is a radio show that will take place on a certain date and time, and that the show will be a debate about a topic, which is death penalty. In the briefing stage, participants are informed about their roles and tasks: who they are going to be and what stand they shall take.

During this activity, learners have to be allocated roles such as a judge, a lawyer, the mother of a victim, human rights activist, the father of a criminal sentenced to death, a government representative, and others. Based on the allocated role, each learner shall do his own research, using online resources and offline resources, if available; to gather information that support his role and the position he/she stands for, that is with or against the death penalty. On the debate day, each learner is given time to present his

argument along with the supporting information, facts, and statistics. After presenting, learners proceed to asking questions and commenting.

Throughout the debate, the teacher takes the role of a moderator doing the radio show ensuring a smooth transition in turns and making sure that each learner is given the time and chance to defend his argument. Moreover, the teacher can make use of a cam recorder or simply a mobile phone to take a video of the debate for later use.

After the simulation activity, learners can be assessed by being asked to write an argumentative essay about the topic based on the discussion that took place during the radio show simulation. In the debriefing stage, the teacher may replay the video and highlight points of weakness and strengths that learners had; moreover, the class may have an open discussion about their success or failure in proving their argument.

Obstacles and considerations

One of the major impediments to the implementation and application of simulations in EFL classrooms is teachers' resistance to the methodology applied (Butler, 2011). Taking into consideration that teachers are used to being at the center of the teaching process, and to be responsible for decision making and guiding in their classrooms, some teachers find it difficult to accept the aspect of being only moderators in a simulation-based language classroom; they assume this affect the "teacher identity" when in the classroom. This could be handled by running continuous classroom management training for teachers so that they can understand their new roles as being facilitators and moderators.

Moreover, some teachers show resistance to this innovative strategy as they have concerns about the efficacy of simulations (Zimmerman, 1990). They assume that simulations do not prepare learners for advanced level courses of EFL. Regarding this criticism, simulations in EFL classrooms trigger critical thinking which is a one of the building-blocks of other EFL language courses. Moreover, simulation-based EFL courses should include rhetoric elements in the syllabus content and methodology.

Finally, often students also considered a hindrance in the execution of this strategy. Taking into consideration that simulation differs from the common and traditional teacher-centered educational model applied in EFL classrooms, students find themselves unable to cope with this self-regulated learning experience. This leads certain students to feel that they are not assigned a certain responsibility and thus they do not apply efficient self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 1999). This issue can be dealt with through guidance, reflection, graded assignments and exams.

Conclusion

Integrating simulations in language classes engages the learners in first-hand experiences of knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, bridges the gap between the classroom world and the real-life experiences that students encounter. When students are given the chance to experience autonomous learning, they obtain empowerment and inspiration. There is no doubt that integrating simulations is challenging and demanding due to the time it requires to be developed and prepared, yet, it is certainly worth doing due to the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that both teachers and students get from it. It is time to leave behind the boring drills, useless memorization, and endless strings of grammatical rules and shift towards modern language acquisition.

References

- Allwright, R. (1984). The importance of interaction in classroom language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 156-171.
- Bambrough, P. (1994). *Simulations in English Teaching*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Butler, Y. G. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 36-57. doi:10.1017/S0267190511000122
- Coleman, D. W. (2002a). "What in the real-world might correspond with the subjective notion of grammatical structure?" *Speculative Notes on Human Linguistics*, No. 1, 2/11/2002. Retrieved on February 25, 2020 from http://coarts.faculty.utoledo.edu/dcoleman/HumLing/HL_speculation_01.pdf
- Gentry, M., Gable, R. K., & Rizza, M. G. (2002) Students' perceptions of classroom activities: are there grade-level and gender differences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94, 539-544.
- Ghanizadeh, A., & Alishahi, M.H. (2016). The bonds between EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities, self-regulatory skills, and language achievement. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 3, 2, 72-85.
- Jacobs, G. M., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2003). Understanding and implementing the CLT (communicative language teaching) paradigm. *RELC Journal*, 34, 1, 5-30. doi:10.1177/003368820303400102
- Jahedizadeh, S., Ghanizadeh, A., & Ghonsooly, B. (2016). The role of EFL learners' demotivation, perceptions of classroom activities, and mastery goal in predicting their language achievement and burnout. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 1-16. DOI 10.1186/s40862-016-0021-8
- Jones, G. (1986). Computer simulations in language teaching - the kingdom experiment. *System*, 14, 2, 171-178
- Jones, K. (1982). *Simulations in Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kelly, L. G. (1969). *Twenty-five centuries of language teaching*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Kharrazi, A., & Kareshki, H. (2010). Environmental perceptions, motivational beliefs and self-regulating learning by Iranian high school students. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 5, 2160-2164
- Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. London: Pergamon.
- Lee, J., Yin, H., & Zhang, Z. (2009). Exploring the influence of the classroom environment on students' motivation and self-regulated learning in Hong Kong. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 18, 2, 219-232.
- Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McArthur, T. (1983). *A Foundation Course for Language Teachers*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

- Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A., Pawlak, M., & Bielak, J. (2017). *Autonomy in second language learning: Managing the resources*. CH: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-07764-2
- Ozkal, K., Tekkaya, C., Cakiroglu, J., & Sungur, S. (2008). A conceptual model of relationships among constructivist learning environment perceptions, epistemological beliefs, and learning approaches. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 19, 71-79.
- Ozsevik, Z. (2010). The use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Turkish EFL teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing CLT in Turkey. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.
- Pintrich, P.R. (1999). The role of motivation in promoting and sustaining self-regulated learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 31, 459-470.
- Rogers, T. (2001) Language teaching methodology. Retrieved on March 05, 2020 from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rodgers.html>.
- Sam, Y. W. (1990). Drama in Teaching English as a Second Language - A Communicative Approach. In: *The English Teacher (XIX); MELTA*
- Saussure, F. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics* (Translated from the French by Wade Baskin). New York: Philosophical Library.
- Savignon, S. J. (1983). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice : texts and contexts in second language learning*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley.
- Thompson, C.K. (1992). Learner-Centered tasks in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25, 523-531.
- Yngve, V. H. (1996). *From grammar to science: New foundations for General Linguistics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Yngve, V. H. (2004). Issues in Hard-Science Linguistics. In Yngve, Victor H. and Zdzislaw Wasik (Eds.), *Hard-Science Linguistics*, 14-26. London: Continuum
- Young, A. J. (1997). I think, therefore I'm motivated: the relations among cognitive strategy use, motivational orientation and classroom perceptions over time. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 9, 3, 249-283
- Zimmerman, B.J. (1990). Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: An overview. *Educational Psychologist*, 25, 1, 3-17.