

Considering communicative fieldwork as a valuable strategy of encouraging foreign language practice: a discussion on implementation, benefits and limitations

‘*Sprechen ist Handeln*’ (Speaking is doing) Heringer (2004)

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore how foreign language learners can improve their foreign language skills through engaging in various out-of-the classroom activities that provide contextual foreign language learning. This discussion encourages the use of locally available target language resources, structures, institutions and organisations to provide a platform or rather communicative field work (CF) for learners to practice what they gather in the classroom. Hence, there are two important issues that arise from it. Firstly, that the classroom remains an important platform to initiate and nurture the target language learning skills of learners, and secondly, that in most cases, foreign language teachers need not to instil in learners, the view that the best environment to improve one's foreign language skill is when one is integrated into a community of speakers (e.g. Dörnyei, 1990). The argument therefore, is that even in areas where the target language is not a dominant language, learners can utilise contact with pockets of competent target language speakers to improve their language skills. In view of these perspectives, this study considers Barker's (2004) and Johnson's (2011) views on the importance of utilising local resources to promote foreign language learning as providing a theoretical background for this discussion. While Barker is of the view that learners can communicate among each other and thus provide a platform for pragmatic foreign language use, Johnson elbows aside the need for learners to be involved in study abroad programmes. Instead he suggests that learners can engage with native speakers, heritage speakers, and bilinguals in their own neighbourhoods. Although Barker and Johnson's views cannot be considered as full-fledged theories, they however, provide an important contribution in how foreign language learning can actually be extended beyond the classroom and thus encourage a practical disposition in foreign language learning. Motivated by these views, this article therefore, intends to discuss how these resources can be utilised, or rather how communicative field work in foreign language learning can be organised and which structures can be manipulated to bring forth productive foreign language learning. Examples from the Zimbabwean context are provided to aid in illustration.

Keywords Communicative fieldwork, foreign language leaning and out-of-class language leaning.

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1. Introduction

Before engaging in this discussion, it needs to be pointed out that this study acknowledges the importance of the foreign language learning classroom not only as an environment where learners are provided with the grammatical knowledge of the target language but are also exposed to a compact (micro) version of the target language culture which is represented mainly by the language learning material. First of all, there is need to understand that, foreign language learning is considered as an activity that is solely done within the confines of the classroom since foreign languages are learnt in environments where they are hardly spoken. Hence, to talk of practical out-of-class target language usage is usually met with scepticism. This article, therefore, does not seek to take away the significance of the classroom in foreign language learning but most importantly, it seeks to debunk the view that foreign language learning does not present much in terms of resources that support pragmatic learning of foreign languages. Taking Zimbabwe as a case study, it seeks to unravel ways of promoting pragmatic foreign language learning even with limited resources. This endeavour is very important especially when considered in the light of a view that has been sustained by a number of influential linguists (such as Brown, 2000 and Block, 2007), that most foreign language learners would not achieve target language mastery and communicative language competence if foreign language learning solely takes place within the confines of the foreign language classroom.

Besides the appeal of the view that the foreign language classroom does not offer adequate learning resources for one to achieve foreign language competence, a number of studies have highlighted what the classroom can offer. For instance, Johnson (2011), observes that the classroom environment can play a very crucial role in the development of a learners' L2 identity. He argues that 'the classroom provides a training ground where learners examine the structure and function of the target language. Because language learning is both individually and socially oriented, the characteristics of each factor influence identity development' (p.10). Hence, the classroom remains an important platform where most of the principles of a particular foreign language are discussed and conceptualized in preparation of the learner's contact with real life situations. However, as Richards (2015) observes,

While language teaching has always been seen as a preparation for out-of-class uses of language, much of the focus in language teaching in the past has typically been on classroom-based language learning. Research, theory and practice has (sic) generally centred on how the classroom, together with teachers, learners and learning resources can provide the necessary conditions for learning to occur (p.5-6).

Perhaps, it is time for foreign language learning teachers and researchers to tear down the boundaries of classroom learning and experiment with various locally available resources to promote pragmatic language learning.

This discussion considers Barker's (2004) and Johnson's (2011) views on how learners of foreign languages can utilise resources around them to practice and develop communicative language competence. In his discussion of the ways in which Japanese learners of English can manipulate out-of-class activities to improve their pragmatic use of English language, Barker argues that these learners can communicate with one another and with other non-native speakers of English in their communities. For instance, he encourages learners to be involved in peer interaction outside the classroom, and states that this may combat the anxiety that usually gripes learners when they finally get a chance to speak with competent target language speakers.

Johnson on the other hand, while acknowledging the benefits of study abroad programmes, pursues the view that, where such opportunities are limited, foreign language learners can establish communication with native speakers, heritage speakers, and bilinguals in their own neighbourhoods.

Barker and Johnson's views can hardly be considered as full-fledged theories. However, they provide an important contribution in how foreign language learning can actually be extended beyond the classroom. Based on these views, this article endeavours to develop CF into an effective concept and strategy that can be used to promote communicative foreign language acquisition.

In general terms, the concept of Communicative Fieldwork (CF) refers to what most SLA and foreign language learning scholars refer to as the 'out-of-class' language learning (Baker, 2006), (Lai and Gu, 2011), (Richards, 2015). Yet, in specific, definitive terms and in the context of this study, the simplicity of the term 'out-of-class' does not do justice to the concept of CF. First of all, it is referred to as 'fieldwork' to emphasise on two important aspects of 'out-of-class' language learning; the *field* and *work* aspects.

1.1. *The field*

While there are some communicative activities that are meant to broaden the skills of foreign language learners to deal with real life situations that can be done within the classroom (such as using audio-visual resources to represent the target language culture, at least at a micro level), CF demands learners to be involved in various activities that are centred on foreign language learning outside the classroom environment, in the actual field where discourses are located and to learn from them as they take place. This way, learners may be able to understand and broaden their elocutionary knowledge of the target language. The field therefore, cannot be described as homogeneous in all foreign language learning settings, but context dependent. The resources that are available within the learners' L1 community that can provide a practical environment for foreign language

acquisition vary from society to society. This article for instance, will provide examples from the Zimbabwean foreign language setting and will cite resources that are available in the Zimbabwean community that can provide a useful environment for practical foreign language learning. Furthermore, while in other contexts, especially the second language learning context, the 'out-of-class' can simply refer to the vicinity of where language instruction takes place (such as within a university), in most foreign language contexts, areas where learners can get pragmatic competence are usually distant and not easy to locate and establish, as such simply calling them 'out-of-class' environments becomes an understatement, considering the work that is involved in establishing them, they can suitably be referred to as the fields of pragmatic learning of foreign language learning. This also (partly) explains the 'work' aspect of fieldwork.

1.2. *The work*

The work aspect is underscored by two considerations; firstly, as explained above, that finding and establishing areas where learners can apply what they learn in the foreign language classroom to real life situations is a challenging task. For instance, the same cannot be said of learners of English as a Second language (ESL) in areas within Kachru's (1985, 1997) inner or outer circles of World Englishes. Secondly, emphasis on the pragmatic learning of foreign language as *work* is drawn from the need to consider it as more significant than just home work. This study encourages 'out-of-class' foreign language learning to be part of learners' course *work*, and not to be considered as merely an extra. Learners therefore, need to be made aware of its significance not only in helping them understand the contextual usage of the target language but also as it contributes to their overall assessment in their language learning proficiency. In the long run, this will motivate them to participate in communicative fieldwork.

Furthermore, CF is described as *communicative*, not only to distinguish this form of field work from what is understood as linguistic field work² which is an activity that is related to research work but also to emphasise on the importance of this form of fieldwork in promoting pragmatic and linguistic competence. The significance of pragmatic language learning in promoting both linguistic and communicative competence is also demonstrated by de Aquino (2011), who argues (through citing Larsen-Freeman, 2000) that learning to communicate through pragmatic means, is another way to approach the goal of developing student's communicative competence. Brown (2000) notes that 'a good share of classroom, school-oriented language is context reduced, while face-to-face communication with people is

²Linguistic fieldwork, as Dixon (2007) puts it, refers to an act of 'going into a community where a language is spoken, collecting data from fluent native speakers, analysing the data, and providing a comprehensive description, consisting of grammar, texts and dictionary' (p.12). Hence, the difference between communicative fieldwork and linguistic fieldwork is that, while both cases involve engaging the target language community, in the former case, the learner intends not only to collect linguistic data (as is the case in the latter situation), but to get opportunities of 'self-repair' and negotiation of meaning (Yi, 2003).

context embedded' (p.246). Hence, this form of field work is described as communicative since it reinforces situated foreign language usage, which provides a contextual meaning.

The view that is underscored in this discussion is that, beside the important role played by the foreign language classroom in equipping learners with a training ground where they examine the structure and function of the target language, it might be beneficial to consider extending the learning process outside the classroom, where teachers and researchers can identify local resources that might provide a pragmatic environment for foreign language learning. This view follows the understanding that in a foreign language context, learners do not have much opportunity to come into contact with the target language community. However, this article argues that this is not an excuse adequate enough to justify total ignorance of locally available resources that can be effectively utilised to promote learner's communicative language competence.

2. Implementation

The first and most important stage in the implementation of CF is the identification of local resources, institutions, organisations and certain individuals who are members of the target language community. The best way of doing this though, will be to allow learners themselves to go out into the L1 community and research about these resources. This will engage their interest and investment since they will likely take ownership of their projects. In the long run, these projects will help learners to be well connected and this might be handy when their time to look for work comes. When looking for local resources for promoting pragmatic foreign language use, one can consider the following:

2.1. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Every society has them in abundance, most of which are involved in humanitarian work. For instance, when it comes to learning German as a foreign language in Zimbabwe, one can approach NGOs such as *Welthungerhilfe* and German International Cooperation. Some of these organization are also involved in joint activities with the Zimbabwean government, for example Zimbabwe German Graphite Mine which is based in Karoi (Zimbabwe).

2.2. Institutions

Most of these institutions have the mandate of promoting the target language and culture. In Zimbabwe for instance, learners of German can approach institutions such as the Goethe Zentrum Harare (Goethe institute in Zimbabwe) which also works closely with the Zimbabwe German Society (ZGS). Through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German government is able to support various language and cultural exchange programmes world-wide. Through the Confucius projects, the Chinese government is engaged in the same endeavour. Short term internships in these institutions can also be arranged to equip and prepare

learners for a pragmatic foreign language experience outside the foreign language classroom.

2.3. *Community gatherings*

Target language community gatherings can also provide important opportunities of mixing and mingling with target language speakers. Target language speakers usually make effort to commemorate various traditional activities even though they are away from their home countries. For instance, in Zimbabwe, Germans try to recreate celebrations such as the *Oktoberfest*, which is a beer festival celebrated annual by Germans around the globe. A club with the name *Oktoberfest Zimbabwe*³ has been created by the rotary club in Harare. While drinking alcohol would not be an activity that learners are encouraged to partake in, such events would provide a relaxed environment for self-enrichment in terms of target language and culture competence. Teachers and learners need to research the information about these gatherings. In these gatherings, they can also get more information on other target language community club gatherings.

2.4. *Embassies*

Most cultural exchange programmes are usually spearheaded by embassies. They are usually the contact between the local and the target language communities. Embassies usually work with various local institutions where their languages are taught. One of the mandates of embassies is to promote visibility of the target language community, hence, many foreign language activities and cultural events revolve around them. For instance, at the University of Zimbabwe, various foreign language sections usually thrive on the support provided by the embassies.

2.5. *Families of target language speakers*

Foreign languages teachers can assist their learners to be able to visit families of the target language speakers where they can have a chance to enrich their learning experience. While the success of this endeavour largely depends on openness of these families, community gatherings present opportunities for forging friendships. Furthermore, target language speakers usually attend particular religious denominations or their children attend particular schools. For instance, in South Africa, a learner of German would benefit from visiting institutions such as the *Deutsche Schule Pretoria*, where German parents drop and pick up their children at this institution. Such arrangements can open up other avenues where learners can employ their language skills into real life situation such as having tandem foreign language learning partners.

2.6. *Utilizing Digitization*

Digitization supports a wide variety of resources that can provide real life experiences of target language use. Learners can download audio visual material such as news, songs, movies, which (guided by their teachers) they

³ See info@oktoberfestzim.com

can analyse and unpack in terms of linguistic and cultural orientation. However, as is demonstrated by Kamiya's (2006) discussion of the Japanese learners of English as a foreign language, access to such resources outside the classroom may be limited in other contexts. In cases such as in most African countries such as in Zimbabwe, access to audio-visual material may be compromised by data costs. In South Africa, access to free public Wi-Fi (available at most public schools) makes access to such material affordable. Learners can also join online forums or chat rooms that are dedicated to foreign language learning. 'They can download Apps that support many aspects of language learning and use these while waiting for the bus, or train or travelling to school' (Richards, 2015, 6).

2.7. Communication with other competent members of the L1 community

This idea is suggested by Baker (2004), who (in his discussion of how Japanese learners of English as a foreign language can utilise local resources) argues that study abroad opportunities do not necessarily benefit all learners. 'The reality of studying abroad for the vast majority of Japanese students is that most of their English practice and learning will take place with other non-native speakers of English' (p.82). In this light, most foreign language learners may be encouraged to utilise the experience of not only native speakers but also locals who have stayed in target language communities for prolonged periods of time. For instance, learners of French in Zimbabwe need not to wait for contact with people from France to put their language skills into practice. There are many African nations where French is considered an official language. For instance, they can communicate with other Africans from Cameroon, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to mention but a few. Learners of Portuguese can communicate not only with people from Mozambique but also with other Zimbabweans who reside in areas along the border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, these areas are in the Manicaland province.

The second stage involves communicating with the institutions, organisations, individuals and families who represent the target language community within the society of where foreign learning is being conducted. This is done in order to find out whether they are willing to assist learners in various foreign language project. The third stage concerns itself with the distribution of tasks to learners. However, as already suggested, it might be more helpful to give learners room to go out and research about what they would like to do as part of their CF project. With the teacher's assistance, they can then come up with tasks and objectives of their projects. This will not only promote their autonomy but also learner motivation, investment and interest. Learners can therefore, work on their projects alongside other classroom activities. Foreign language teachers need to act as facilitators of CF, monitoring the progress of their learners every time and availing

themselves whenever these learners need their assistance in issues related to their CF projects.

The final level is that of performance, where learners once or twice a week are supposed to present their progress and experience to the whole class. For their effort, and as part of motivating them, the teacher needs to assess their performance and give them a mark every time they perform. These marks are recorded and thus culminate to the overall CF mark of twenty percent (20%), which is considered as part of the end of semester assessment.

Pertaining to how these presentations are done, learners need to be advised to keep a record of new vocabulary and phrases whose contextual use they may need to explain to other learners. They can also role play to display certain behaviour they might have picked up during the activities of their projects. When done this way, these project can be enjoyable. These projects can be done in pairs so as to maintain student motivation and interest. For instance, Barker (2004) observes that Japanese students do not like to be the only one to try something new. Hence, doing these projects in pairs can not only increase their participation but also their interests. After all, as Benson (2006) observes, recent studies suggest that learners tend to engage in out-of-the class learning activities more frequently than their teachers know. In these activities, they display considerable creativity. Hence, asking them to choose partners for their projects can create a favourable environment for them to show autonomy and creativity.

3. Benefits

Firstly, CF may be considered as a great concept to apply alongside integrative language and culture learning strategies. This is mainly because these learning strategies seek to promote communicative language competence, by teaching language together with its cultural context.

Secondly, the reliance on local competent target language experts might have a hidden advantage; local target language experts have an experience and understanding of both the L1 and the target language cultures. Hence, they can be much more effective interlocutors who (by virtue of understanding the L1 identities of learners) can facilitate negotiation of meaning which in the long run may likely promote not only learners' linguistic proficiency but also their communicative language competence.

Lastly, CF can uplift the learning spirit of foreign language learners, being involved in CF projects can improve learners' motivation and linguistic self-confidence. For instance, Clement et al. (1977) argued that being integrated into a target language speaker community can improve learners' linguistic self-confidence⁴. Linguistic self-confidence refers to "the belief that one has the ability to produce results, accomplish goals or perform tasks

⁴ The concept was introduced in L2 literature by Clement 'to describe a secondary, mediating motivational process in multi-ethnic settings that affects a person's motivation to learn and use an L2' (Dörnyei, 1994, 277). However it was applied to foreign language learning by Clement et. al (1994).

competently” (Dörnyei, 1994, 277). Hence, if this understanding is sustainable, CF, which provides a micro target language setting for pragmatic language use, may promote learners’ linguistic self-confidence. After all, Barker (2004), through his study of the Japanese learners of English language, observes that learners who were involved in out-of-class activities, pointed out that they no longer panic when communicating with expert target language users. Hence, suggesting that being involved in CF, increases their linguistic self-confidence and motivation to engage native target language speakers.

4. Limitations

4.1. Limited Resources

Limited resources can hinder the implementation of CF. Both time and financial resources can be a problem especially in underdeveloped nations where learners have limited financial resources and spend most of their time attending to problems related to their basic survival such as finding food and shelter. Time can also be a problem in institutions of high learning, where students have more than one subject they have to learn. For instance Bachelor of Arts (general) students usually study three subjects including a foreign language. Finding extra time to engage in CF sessions can therefore, be a problem. However, as noted by Roberts et. al (2005), utilising digitization, can help learners to multi task and thus save time and effort. Roberts et. al (2005).

Furthermore, some of the CF resources may not be readily accessible, hence demanding in terms of time and financial resources. However, as is going to be explained (under ‘suggestions’), teachers need to be cognisance of this limitation and make a plan. Teachers also need to make up time or manage their in-class time in a way that affords the presentation and discussions of learners' findings and progress in their CF activities.

4.2. Based on learners’ investment

Since CF thrives on the interest and cooperation of the learner, foreign language teachers need to consider the investment of the majority of learners, so as to establish whether they will find communicative fieldwork activities part of their objectives and goals. For instance, in a Zimbabwean foreign language class, it is very common to find a group of learners who are merely interested in getting a grade (whatever it is, as long as it is a pass). This is well captured in Ahrens’ (2006)⁵ experience that:

There are students who yawn when they listen to me and pitch up in class when they feel like it. Then there are students who refuse to accept what I teach them. They come regularly to the class only to

⁵ Ahrens is credited with establishing the German section at the University of Zimbabwe, through training local learners to take over the teaching of German as a foreign language at this institution.

show me that they do not believe in what I say. Then there is the clown and the women with girlish behaviour (sic) (p.10).

This therefore, demonstrates the need to consider the importance of learners' investment when planning CF. While CF may benefit both learners with short term and long term goals of learning foreign languages, most learners who are driven by short term objectives and who need basic understanding of foreign languages, might avoid activities that will demand them to exert a little bit more effort in the learning process. However, most learners who have long term investments with foreign languages, might display an intrinsic motivation to engage in out-of-class activities that will likely enrich their learning experiences.

4.3. *More work for teachers*

Managing CF projects can be strenuous to teachers who need to monitor the progress of every learner. However, this can actually present an opportunity for foreign language teachers to work closely with their learners and in such an environment, they can understand the problems, limitations and cognitive abilities of their learners. They can then use this information to help their learners master the target language.

5. **Suggestions**

Firstly, as already pointed out in the explanation of the meaning of fieldwork in the context of this discussion, this study advocates for field work to be considered as part of coursework assessment. For instance, in the German section at the University of Zimbabwe, language proficiency assessment is usually calculated as follows:

50= Written end-of-semester Examination
20= Coursework (such as in class tests)
25= Oral end-of-semester Examination
05= Attendance⁶

CF can therefore, be included either under course work or under oral examination. For instance, if it is included under oral examination, this will imply that CF will now contribute twenty percent (20%) towards oral examination, while the final end-of-semester oral performance will contribute five percent (5%) to make it twenty five (25%) percent altogether. The overall assessment will be as follows:

50= Written end-of-semester Examination
20= Coursework (such as in class tests)
25= Oral (20%=CF and 5%=end-of-semester oral)
05= Attendance
100%= Total

⁶ Including attendance in assessment is done *as a way* of encouraging learners to regularly participate in learning activities, see Ahrens (2006, 10).

However, this is just one way CF can be incorporated into the overall assessment of language performance, foreign language teachers can introduce their own ways of calculating assessment. The major point is that they should attempt to incorporate CF in their assessment.

Secondly, foreign language learners should be taught a culture of recording most of their CF sessions. They can write down new phrases (and their particular contexts), vocabulary etc. Most importantly, they should attempt to record audio visual material which may prove handy later. Audio visual material can be considered a vital exhibit not only for classroom presentations but most importantly for revision purposes. This is the material that learners can revise (mainly at home) and carefully establish its meaning. Through revision, they can establish new points of interests that they might have overlooked during the actual CF sessions. In the long run, this culture of recording information can be helpful in moulding these learners to be effective researchers, who know how to gather and analyse information.

Lastly, in some instances where the limitation of resources such as time and financial resources might threaten the progress of CF, foreign language teachers (on behalf of particular concerned learners) can invite some of the organisations, institutions or individuals to give presentations or (over a cup of tea) casual talk in the present of these learners. Embassies and most non-profit making organisations that are involved in humanitarian work are usually inclined to accept such invitations.

6. Conclusion

The main interest of this discussion was to unravel the means by which foreign language teachers can improve their learners' pragmatic experience of using target language through encouraging them to engage in communicative field work (CF). This discussion comes in the wake of the entrenched understanding of foreign language learning as an activity condemned to take place within the walls of the classroom. This article therefore, while acknowledging the significance of the classroom in foreign language learning, argues that, even though foreign language learning takes place in environments that are divorced from main target language communities, pockets of local target language resources can be utilised for this purpose. The article therefore, explores how CF can be implemented and thrive through tapping into these local resources. The resources that are identified in this study include (*inter alia*) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), various institutions that are either concerned with the target language and culture or simply originate from the target language countries, target language community gatherings, families of target language speakers and embassies.

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