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Nixon Cadet

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Boosting EFL Fluency Through Active Task-, Agency-based, and Context-Specific Lessons

Boosting students' fluency through incorporating context-specific content into Task-Based Language Teaching, reflecting on their fatalistic cultural beliefs, and fostering their agency.

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in TESOL degree  
at SIT Graduate Institute,  
Brattleboro, Vermont.

. April 17, 2020

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Date: April 17, 2020

### **ABSTRACT**

This study will look into incorporating context-specific content into Task-Based Language Teaching techniques to enable students at the American University of the Caribbean in Les Cayes, Haiti, to develop fluency. It will particularly draw lessons from my own language learning and teaching experiences and explore ways to establish a culture that nurtures students' agency. In my context, many students have deeply ingrained fatalistic cultural beliefs which are not conducive to optimal learning. Therefore, fostering a culture that reconsiders these views could strongly help boost their self-efficacy and confidence and compel them to embrace productive learning strategies and behaviors. This study will finally delve into the literature and my own experience to devise a theoretical framework which can help boost English learners' fluency development in my context.

## **ERIC DESCRIPTORS**

Action-based Teaching and Learning

Agency, Identity, and Investment in EFL

Context-Specific Content in TBLT

Cultural Beliefs and EFL Teaching and Learning

EFL Fluency Development

Fatalistic Beliefs and EFL

Folk Narratives

Folk Tales

Reflection and Language Learning

Storytelling

Task-Based Language Teaching

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## INTRODUCTION

The primary reason I am drawn to the topic above is that I want to respond to my students' desire to develop their speaking proficiency, their priority, in my context. Besides, I feel that the American University of the Caribbean's students and administration are dissatisfied with most learners' lack of oral proficiency after having spent about two years studying English. I am exploring avenues to expedite and optimize their learning to help them hone their speaking skills.

My students have often suggested that I devote more time having them practice speaking in class. Many of them feel bored when I use the coursebook for most of the class time and would rather that I spent most of the time having them engage in discussions about context-specific topics, generate their own content, learn vocabulary and language that is more relevant to their discourse circles and which they stand more chances to use when practicing English outside the classroom. Some of them feel that the content of the assigned textbook, *Standout*, designed for English language learners in the United States, is not appropriate for their context. Therefore, crafting and utilizing materials which are related to their everyday lives is certainly a great way to increase their motivation and their investment and get them to engage in meaningful activities.

Another issue that needs to be addressed to help students improve their speaking skills is related to many Haitians' deeply ingrained fatalistic cultural beliefs about success and other life events. A lot of them believe in destiny and feel that success in life depends more on the latter than on personal efforts and discipline. Therefore, students tend to not make the required efforts and exert adequate personal agency to enhance their learning. They do not feel fully accountable for their progress and believe that they do not have much control over their future. For this

reason, finding ways to have them reflect on and change their beliefs can open their eyes to clear possibilities and resources available to them, which could go a long way in mobilizing them to take actions towards meeting their educational goals.

To this end, my personal language learning experience could serve as a vivid source of inspiration. Disclosing the steps I had to take to improve my speaking, the various obstacles I had to overcome, and the learning strategies that worked for me can help boost their self-efficacy and confidence and shed spotlight on what they can achieve if they put in enough efforts. I will particularly highlight the power of agency and showcase how it has compelled me to take initiative to practice and improve my speaking and other skills both inside and outside the classroom. I will also seek to extract nuggets of insights from my teaching experiences, which will enable me to improve my teaching and my students' learning skills.

Drawing insights from the literature and my own learning and teaching experiences, this paper seeks to develop a theoretical framework which, properly implemented, can help English learners in Haiti to fully develop their fluency.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

### **How Cultural Beliefs Influence People's Decisions**

Cultural beliefs are among the strongest factors that influence people's decision-making process and thus affect their everyday routines and future dreams. A study conducted in February and March 1988 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and its suburbs about factors that influence people's decision to wear seat belts found that drivers who believe in destiny are less likely to wear them (Colón, 1992). Seat belt users are found to be less fatalistic than non-users. Colón argued that "If one is strongly wed to the notion that the end of life is divinely decreed, efforts based on reason or logic will fall on deaf ears" (p. 875).

According to the functionalist theory, fatalistic attitudes serves various roles in people's lives such as sense-making, face-saving, stress relief, and uncertainty management (Keeley & al, 2009). Current literature highlights that fatalism is related to feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness; these emotions are frequently experienced by learners in my context. Keeley's article states, "Taken together, this broad body of research suggests that fatalism is an attitude that may contribute to negative health outcomes, ..." (p. 736).

Analogically, I strongly believe that a fatalistic attitude could lead to negative learning performance as well, since learning involves making decisions.

Another study on road safety in Pakistan shows that fatalism causes lots of accidents that result in injuries and deaths and the difficulties of preventing those events due to the drivers' entrenched beliefs in destiny and fate (Kayani & al, 2012). The authors stated that "Research in both developed and developing countries demonstrates that fatalism can take many forms and in developing countries may have religious and ethnic associations" (p. 1044). The article highlights how fatalism can be a strong barrier to health education and behavior change. Fatalism exists to some degree in all societies; however, it is interesting how pervasive it is in developing countries like mine. Many factors help shape people's fatalistic beliefs including religions, political systems, natural disasters, social environment, and socio-economic conditions, factors which have solidified beliefs in fatalism in my context.

Hopefully, research has shown that fatalistic beliefs can change (Keeley & al, 2009; (Kayani & al, 2012). Some studies have highlighted that culturally relevant messages can help change fatalistic attitudes but not eradicate them (Keeley & al, 2009).

Consistent and culture-friendly reflection activities in the classroom can invite students to reconsider their fatalistic beliefs and consistently change their views so that they can perceive new windows of learning opportunities.

### **How the Learners' Culture Influences their Language Learning**

Though I do not assume that the ELLs' culture can negatively affect their learning of English, I strongly feel that teachers should take it into consideration. Just as cultural beliefs influence people's decision-making process in their mundane activities, others have argued that cultural beliefs do influence their learning of English. Kumagai (1994) highlighted how the Japanese culture affects Japanese students' learning of English and their fluency development. Silence is highly viewed as a virtue in Japan; therefore, students tend to not be talkative when participating in practice activities (p. 19), which Kumagai claims greatly slows down their fluency development. One of the Japanese sayings goes, "If there are many words, there will be much shame". No wonder Japanese students hesitate to be fully involved in oral practice activities. The author pointed out that Japanese's beliefs in silence originated in Buddhism and is ingrained in their traditions. Kumagai said, "The Japanese tendency for long silences means less talking and this leads to less practice of English language" (P. 31).

Chinese' cultural beliefs that knowledge in the sole domain of the wise and highly-educated scholars (Mast 2014) and that only the latter are capable of expressing their views about a particular topic or subject can be problematic. Mast claims,

When a teacher asks for a student to give an opinion, the student, despite having an opinion, will be highly reluctant to share it. Part of this is linked to the educational experience of placing knowledge in a paramount position in the educational process (p. 43).

According to Mast's article, the Chinese culture deeply influences China's overall education system since traditions determine how students interact in learning situations, leaving no room for students' use of their agency since wisdom is viewed as the sphere of the elite few scholars. The learners, as a result, cannot fathom the value of concise writing and are very reluctant in engaging in practice tasks which require higher-order thinking.

Kumagai and Mast's findings alone do not provide conclusive evidence that English learners' culture can negatively impact their learning. However, they do suggest that more research should be conducted on the link between learners' cultural beliefs and language learning outcomes, which could help teachers find out what facets of the culture help or unconsciously hinder learning and adjust their teaching approach accordingly.

### **Beliefs in Fatalism and their Implications for the Learning of English in Haiti**

A lot of Haitians' beliefs in destiny and luck significantly shape their concept about the future and their educational development. Many Haitians, mostly the less educated ones who form the largest part of the population, take it for granted that luck plays a major role in what the future holds for someone no matter how hard they work. In fact, I have been concerned with how many of them view accidents and fatalities and how they consequently consider it senseless to take appropriate measures to prevent needlessly exposing themselves to obviously very risky situations. This is one reason that preventing the spread of the current COVID-19 pandemic in Haiti is doubtlessly very challenging.

For instance, I have tried, to no avail, to convince lots of motorcyclists to avoid over-speeding and to wear helmets especially when they have to travel a long distance and will probably speed up to get to their destinations as fast as they can. An increasing number of them have been killed for over-speeding even without wearing protective gear. One of my cousins

rode a motorbike from Port-au-Prince to Les Cayes, normally a four-hour ride, with no protective gear at all, in two hours and boasted about it. When I tried to draw his attention to how risky his trip was, he dismissed my argument telling me that he would be killed in an accident only if he were destined to, not through exposing himself to harm.

I have heard Haitians say that you would do well in life if you were destined to, and that very often your efforts have little to do with your success in life. I have seen people mesmerized at seeing someone speak a foreign language as if some innate good fortune has endowed that person with a special inborn gift, ignoring and dismissing the fact that their speaking skill is the result of strenuous and consistent efforts and practice.

I have looked into how a major part of the Haitian population's deeply embedded beliefs in destiny and luck can adversely impact their learning. I strongly believe that such a fatalistic mindset may potentially discourage people from putting in adequate efforts and discipline to succeed in life in general and students in particular might believe that their learning progress does not entirely depend on hard work, consistent effort, and personal discipline. Such mentality is usually rooted in the larger culture – such as proverbs/sayings and diverse religious faiths – which reinforces it. A Haitian saying that supports this belief goes, “Sa Bondye sere pou ou, lavalas pa ka pote l ale.” (No flood can take away what God holds in store for you.)

Using proverbs from other cultures like “God helps those who help themselves”, which provide opposite lessons to destiny-related Haitian sayings, is certainly a powerful way to establish a proactive culture that fosters students' agency in the classroom and outside of it. The contrasting of the two proverbs encourages critical thinking, an indispensable skill to enable students to effectively reconsider their entrenched cultural views. Having students work on projects that allow them to see how personal efforts can influence their lives is a very practical

way to help them internalize new and productive cultural perspectives. I have incorporated activities into my lessons which provide learners with opportunities to reflect on their beliefs in destiny. To engage them in such reflections, I often have them participate in debates about Haitian sayings where I randomly select the members of each team, leaving them no choice. After each debate, a plenary is held, and each student gives their views and reflects on the beliefs associated with the proverb. Such activity, among others, can tremendously and positively help change learners' beliefs since it is specifically relevant to their wider culture (Keeley & al, 2009; (Kayani & al, 2012).

### **Learners' Agency and Language Learning**

There has been so much political and environmental turmoil in Haiti that is out of students' control, which is very likely to trigger feelings of powerlessness. As previously mentioned, the latter, highlighted by current literature, is closely related to beliefs in fatalism (Keeley & al, 2009), a major hurdle to learners' exerting their personal agency. Therefore, the need for students to feel in control of their learning is all the more essential and could positively impact beliefs of fatalism in other aspects of their lives and enhance their agency and investment in their learning. Norton (1995) pointed out, "Investment is a notion that emphasizes the efforts learners put into learning with the anticipation of acquiring tangible or intangible returns that will 'increase the value of their cultural capital'" (p. 17). Therefore, learners will not put in adequate efforts in their learning unless they believe that they will be rewarded.

Human beings have innate abilities to learn and thus constantly use their agency to gain new skills in order to be able to cope with issues facing them and enjoy life to the fullest (Schraube & al, 2019). For English learners to be able to use their agency in the teaching-learning process, they should be allowed to make decisions about what happens in the classroom.

Schraube and Marvakis pointed out that a participative and problem-oriented approach to learning is key. Since students come to class with their cultural beliefs, agency, goals, desires, and backgrounds, they need to be active subjects of their learning process. As such, they should have a say in the content and methods of internalizing new knowledge. Otherwise, they risk losing their enthusiasm and disown the learning process, which compromises their ability to learn. Since learning is a natural part of all humans' daily behaviors, learning sessions should be viewed as an expansion of their daily activities (Schraube and Marvakis, 2019).

Humans are constantly learning, and the latter can be intentional or unintentional, planned or incidental. Learning is an action; therefore, it requires some agency on the part of the learner to happen effectively. Learners are motivated to take actions to learn when they own the learning problem and process and are invested in it. Therefore, lesson contents and learning techniques should not be imposed on learners if they are to effectively proceed with their natural learning conduct. Shraube and Marvakis pointed out that learners "...ought to be given the opportunity of actively shaping their learning processes including the education practice" (p. 441).

Learners should not be viewed as consumers of knowledge but as competent agents who directly contribute to and influence the learning process. Learning is part of the continuum of humans' daily conduct and should be connected to the learners' routines and their future dreams. Every class is like a conversation between the teacher and the learners, and this idea is echoed in Shraube and Marvakis' article (2019). They alleged that though learning should be learner-centered, "the dialogue with teachers is certainly necessary for learners to identify and develop the learning problems" (p.444). Students, who are the central actors of the teaching-learning

process should be taken seriously in that they should have a say in the “what” and “how” of their learning.

Though this paper is not concerned with exploring the ecological approach to language learning, it is, however, interested in looking into the roles of agency in language learning and shares the idea of providing or help learners notice affordances that can facilitate and boost learning. Providing learners with affordances and helping them to discover learning resources in their environment can significantly prod them to use their agency to access those affordances to improve their learning. Learning does not happen only in the classroom, it continues to occur throughout the learner’s daily routines and through their interactions with affordances in their environment (Lier, 2000). Lier pointed out that “If the language learner is active and engaged, they will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for linguistic action” (p. 252).

It sounds like many language learners demonstrate perceived agency – “the degree to which learners believe that the efforts they are putting into the learning process is sufficient with respect to the learning objective” (Brown 2014, p. 101). This type of agency can be problematic since it is usually not enough to help them achieve proficiency, yet, in the learners’ view, they have put forth a great amount of personal agency. Students tend to keep their previous high school language learning culture, which was not conducive to fluency development, and this hinders their capacity to use adequate agency. Large classes can constitute a major hurdle to students changing their learning culture at college level since the teacher will naturally have difficulties controlling individual students’ involvement.

Carson defined agency as “an individual capacity for self-awareness and self-determination: decision-making, ability to enact or resist change, and take responsibility for actions” (Carson 2012). Van Lier views it as “the ways in which, and the extents to which, a

person is compelled to, motivated to, allowed to, and coerced to, act”, and “the person deciding to, wanting to, insisting to, agreeing to, and negotiating to, act”(Van Lier 2010, p. x). Therefore, agency involves initiative and self-regulation on the part of the subject. For the learner to become adequately agentic, they need to be confident that their efforts to influence their learning circumstances can be fruitful. So, a sense of self-efficacy is indispensable, and the context can also affect learners’ agency.

Brown (2014) points out that “Agency and motivation are closely intertwined” (p. 104). According to the overarching framework Self-Determination Theory (SDT), motivation is defined as “an inherent orientation towards growth and development, energized and sustained, in part, by the fulfilment of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness” (Niemiec & al 2006, p. 762). Motivation can be triggered by an activity that the subject views as fascinating and gratifying. It can be intrinsic or extrinsic, but intrinsic motivation, a key factor in L2 learning success, is more powerful since students naturally enjoy the learning activity and experience satisfaction by just being involved in it.

Brown, in his article about French college students studying English as a curriculum requirement, pointed that they seemed to use their agency to resist the change of language learning approaches that demand that they be more proactive in the learning process, assuming that passivity is an effective way to the L2. Brown’s article highlighted that many studies have demonstrated that learners’ agency is linked to their context, attitude, and motivation to learn the L2. Highly motivated learners obviously display stronger agency, have greater capacity to recall, and improve their learning better.

Students’ culture seems to strongly influence their level of motivation, attitude, and beliefs, hence their degree of personal agency (Brown, 2014). Brown pointed out, “France is

positioned high on Hofstede's (2006) Risk-Avoidance Index, suggesting that French learners prefer guidance and supervision over independence and autonomy, both of which are implied in constructs concerning motivation and agency" (p. 119). He advocates for the use of the task-based approach to help learners develop stronger autonomy and agency since this approach can improve students noticing skills and awareness.

Since learning a foreign language affects the learner's identity, agency plays a major role in helping them to navigate their new identity territory. Learning a new language, like exploring a new land, requires a great deal of personal intervention. When students transition to a classroom culture that is different from the previous one, they experience a shift in identity and agency as they struggle to successfully adjust to their new situation (Hayes & Mansour 2016). They may have to develop new beliefs, attitude, and learning strategies as the identity developed in a previous educational setting does not match their new environment, which forces them to negotiate their new self. This situation can cause a decrease of self-confidence, anxiety, and alienation. Hayes and Mansour (2006) argued that "such cultural and linguistic changes can lead to some difficulties with learning, resulting in disturbed trajectories in identity negotiations as learners move between the two educational systems" (p. 355).

Identity and Agency are closely intertwined since the latter "refers to strategic actions that can be taken because of certain individual attributes" (Hayes and Mansour 2016, p. 356). The identity shaped by a learner's previous learning experiences could have bestowed upon them attributes that hinder or help their personal agency in a novel environment. They may have to struggle to adjust to and thrive in their new context. When they have solid academic backgrounds about a topic, they are likely to be more agentic since their knowledge can compensate for their

lack of linguistic expertise, which boosts their agency (Koh 1985). Hayes and Mansour (2016) pointed out,

It was suggested that students learn the material by utilizing their linguistic skills and background knowledge of the topic and when language skills are somewhat weaker, good background knowledge allows the same students to refer to the memory of what they have studied before to still make sense of what they are studying now (p. 357).

A study on science students from Bahraini national schools studying English in an international setting found that their background knowledge allows them to negotiate their identity in diverse cultural contexts (Hayes and Mansour 2016). In this study, identity is viewed as “people’s capacity to interact with others and with material conditions in order to shape their own destinies” (Hayes and Mansour 2016, p. 356).

A study by Xiao (2014) showed that agency clearly affects the learner’s identity and confidence in their abilities and vice versa. When the learner’s personal agency allows them to improve their learning, their self-efficacy is boosted and their motivation is positively impacted, which, in a virtuous cycle, compels them to continue to use their agency. Self-efficacy is key to the learner exercising their agency. When the learner is successful in using their agency, their belief in their self-efficacy is strengthened (Xiao 2014). Lier (2008) pointed out that agency is instrumental in helping a learner to reconstruct their identity, and their motivation to improve their persona can significantly foster their motivation. The learner’s desire to achieve lofty goals can prompt them to withstand unimaginable hardships while continuing to exert their agency.

Motivated learners use their strong personal agency to develop their metacognitive skills and then take actions to achieve their learning goals. Metacognition makes the learner think

about their strengths and weakness, explore the affordances available, devise the best strategies, and take appropriate actions. Xiao's article (2014) about a Chinese student studying English online highlighted how his agency enabled him to reconstruct his identity, develop solid self-efficacy, sustainable motivation, and strong metacognitive skills. Dan, the student, made lots of sacrifices and worked very hard to improve his English. Xiao pointed out that personal agency, identity reconstruction, self-efficacy, and metacognition are strongly interconnected. Learning a foreign language is a socioculturally situated process (Gao 2012) and learners' personal agency in developing appropriate cultural strategies to learn the language is key.

### **Nurturing Learners' Agency**

The learner's personal agency can be helped or hindered by lots of factors such as their context, wider culture, school culture, family upbringing, and identities. Therefore, for individual students to fully develop their personal agency, they need their teachers' assistance. Bahou (2012), in *Cultivating Student Agency and Teachers as Learners in One Lebanese School*, highlighted steps that must be taken by teachers and school administration to enable their students to develop and utilize their agency. Interestingly, the author pointed out teachers must also use a great deal of personal agency and be open-minded enough to view themselves as co-learners to be able to foster students' personal agency.

Student voice is one indispensable element that should be valued for them to be more agentic about their learning (Cook-Sather 2006). Student voice is shaped by teachers, school administrators, policy makers, researchers, and students themselves. For students to have a voice, a cultural shift about the relationship between students and pedagogical decision-makers is crucial. Students' identities and sense of agency are shaped by the school and their wider society's cultural norms and practices which usually do not encourage students to use their

agency. Therefore, a lot of students, in turn, come to view agency as unnecessary for them to be successful in their learning endeavors. Flutter and Rudduck (2004) alleged that “Student voice for school improvement is desirable because, ‘as expert witnesses’ of their schooling experience, students can provide new ways of thinking about improving learning” (p. 2). Teachers need to be open to students’ comments and suggestions and demonstrate willingness to actively and empathetically listen to their views. The educational actors should create an environment and activities that cultivate student voice and enhance their self-confidence.

Watkins (2005) views agency as “intentional action, exercising choice, making a difference and monitoring effects” (p. 47). Agency-oriented activities allow both teachers and students to exercise their agency as they strive to get through cultural and societal barriers to create avenues where they can learn from each other and negotiate their new identities and roles in the learning process (Bahou 2012).

According to Block (2007), identity can be thought of as “socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret, and project . . . identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future” (p. 27). Therefore, the learners’ identities are constantly evolving and growing, and they are both real and imagined since EFL students’ dreams are to become English speakers or users (imagined identities) and to be able to interact with communities of English speakers (imagined communities). As Wu (2017) put it, “Imagined communities and identities can play a critical role, influencing the learners’ agency to make different learning decisions that may contribute to the shaping of the learners’ learning trajectories” (p. 103). These imagined communities and identities can significantly intensify learners’ investment into their learning as well. Therefore, teachers should, through suitable learning tasks, help students shape imagined identities that

drive them to boost their learning by adopting appropriate behaviors and utilizing the right strategies to achieve their dreams.

Since teachers who use their personal agency in the classroom are more likely to create opportunities where their students can use and develop theirs, it is crucial that teacher education programs incorporate a module on providing English teachers, especially those who have been educated in contexts where fatalistic beliefs are prevalent, with scaffolding tools to develop their agency and support them in crafting their own in their curriculums. That would greatly help create a wider culture where more and more English learners are offered opportunities to nurture their agency to positively impact the language teaching-learning process.

### **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)**

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been thriving for the last three decades in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA) and has been effective in helping learners develop proficiency (Ahmadian, 2016). Through TBLT, the learners are offered numerous occasions to develop linguistic skills that they can readily use in the real world. TBLT lends itself well to project-based activities and provides tasks that respond to learners' deepest needs. For TBLT to be suitable for the learners' needs, it must be tailored to their context.

TBLT tasks repetition is an effective technique to boost learners' fluency and oral production (Ahmadian & al, María del Pilar García (Eds.) 2017), which makes it very appropriate for my context. Findings have pointed out procedural task repetition enables learners to improve both fluency and accuracy. Ahmadian and Mayo highlighted that completing tasks allows learners to develop both fluency and accuracy. In fact, Wen pointed out that teaching learners phrasal knowledge can help them to develop proficiency. Fixed phrases (formulaic sequences) should be used to help learners perform linguistic tasks since they can holistically and

readily be retrieved by both native and non-native speakers when processing language (Ahmadian & al, María del Pilar García (Eds.) 2017).

The expansive learning nature of TBLT makes it a very prolific approach to developing learners' proficiency development since it takes into consideration their history, social discourses, cultural beliefs, and their intercultural competence (Robertson 2014). Through performing linguistic tasks inside and outside the classroom, learners have multiple chances to use and transform prior knowledge through learning cycles – pre-, during-, and post-tasks – into new digestible knowledge. Robertson pointed out that “TBLT is a pedagogy premised on the belief that “the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use” (p. 189). The teacher understandably needs to situate their teaching approach for deep learning to happen, hence their being aware of their students' ingrained cultural beliefs is crucial if they are to be able to craft tasks and select contents which correspond to their needs. One effective tenet of TBLT is the negotiation that is going on among learners throughout the learning process (Robertson 2014). Learners have to negotiate meaning, strategies, rules, criteria, their hypotheses, their cultural beliefs, their roles, and even their identities. They thus become a community of practice (Robertson 2014) where the teacher is mostly a facilitator.

Using context-specific lessons and class activities with TBLT can greatly help improve students' speaking fluency according to Kanoksilapatham and Suranakkharin (2019). The latter posited that “the task-based approach is a learner-oriented instruction in which the learning revolves around the completion of meaningful tasks in real world contexts” (p. 2). As stated by Richards and Rogers (2001), “Tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning” (p. 228).

Context-specific content in TBLT make lessons more meaningful and engaging since learners can use what they learn for authentic tasks. Studies have confirmed that learners have a positive attitude toward TBLT, especially when it is situated in the learner's wider cultural and societal context (Kanoksilatham & Suranakkharin 2019). TBLT activities such as role plays proved to have helped improved students' oral ability in diverse contexts around the world (Kanoksilatham & Suranakkharin 2019). It is important to note that implementing TBLT in the learners' context involves teaching English as a means for global communication or *lingua franca*, not just as it is used in English-speaking countries.

Even context-specific content can sometimes be daunting for students, let alone content with native speakers' cultural features. Therefore, using prescribed commercial coursebooks that are irrelevant to learners' cultural context can be counterproductive and hinder optimal learning. As Kanoksilatham and Suranakkharin (2019) highlighted,

The successful implementation of TBLT and the students' positive attitudes towards the instruction can be discussed in support of three potential determinants: the use of context specific-based lessons, the task selection, and the effective use of scaffolding strategies (p. 19).

For English lessons to work, they need to be closely related and relevant to the learners' context (Kanoksilatham & Suranakkharin 2019). Context-specific contents make lessons less intimidating and more learner-friendly, thus facilitating, optimizing, and expediting learning. Relating English lessons to diverse cultural aspects of students' schemata like art, geography, history, traditions, and folklores provides built-in scaffolding, taps into their interests, and draws favorable attitude toward the target language and the task at hand, thus generating the necessary edge for optimal learning to happen.

It is intriguing that TBLT is compatible with many other effective teaching approaches like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and the Communication Language Teaching (CLT). TBLT represents the strong approach of the latter as it attempts to identify and respond to the learners' needs as the learning process unfolds. The learning of the language thus happens naturally and organically. Kanoksilapatham and Suranakkharin pointed out that "Since CLIL is also predicated on the idea of nurturing naturalistic acquisition through meaningful use, this means that task-based approaches hold promise for CLIL " (Moore and al 2015, p. 336).

CLIL Tasks can be used both to provide input (based on reading or listening texts) as well as to prompt output (engaging learners in speaking or writing activities) (Ellis 2009). Also, tasks make it easier to break things down into manageable and digestible learning chunks, which makes learning more enjoyable. Providing scaffolding is crucial if the learners are to be successful. The teacher needs to be able to anticipate learners' needs and provide adequate support so that tasks remain both doable and challenging enough to foster the student' creative skills.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) incorporated into Action-Based Teaching (ABT) enlivens the EFL learning process, offering students more opportunities to use their agency, grow their new identities, and develop their autonomy. ABT, defined by Ahearn (2001) as "the socioculturally-mediated capacity to act" (Lier 2007, p.46), is compatible with a lot of other language teaching approaches as well. A key tenet of ABT is that it puts particular emphasis on agency, autonomy, identity, and perception. Like TBLT, ABT focuses on creating a space where the learners can holistically engage in meaningful language learning activities. Infusing life through the language learning process by combining ABT with TBLT and other

approaches can significantly optimize and expedite learning since actions are the epicenter of all its facets.

When students are given opportunities to be active agents of the learning process, they come to perceive themselves as being in control, growing, and evolving. Therefore, they do not have to struggle to assume new identities throughout the language learning process since “the core of identity is voice, and voice implies agency” (Lier 2007, p. 47). For students to be able to fully use their agency and voice, they should be allowed to set their own goals and share their views about what happens inside and outside the classroom; thus the curriculum should provide a space for incorporating and implementing the learners’ insights and for unpredictability and improvisation (Lier 2007).

### **Incorporating Learners’ Context-Specific Content into Lessons**

A study (Aldera, 2017) of western English coursebooks used in Saudia Arabia pinpoints cultural clashes that their content can trigger, and this can powerfully affect the learning of English. Textbooks designed in the target culture do not consider the culture and typical discourses of the contexts where they may end up being used. Tasks and activities are usually related to the society and lifestyle of the target culture, which caused countries such as China, Venezuela, Morocco, Cameroon, and Kuwait to change their foreign language policies to preserve their cultures (Aldera, 2017). The article points out,

EFL or ESL textbooks designed and produced in England or America mostly use events, incidents or actions which often carry target cultural viewpoints on life and society and they profoundly affect the L2 learners' psychological and intellectual growth (p. 222).

Textbooks containing events and incidents that are relevant to the learners' context can really tap into their emotions and identity and thus boost their enthusiasm to get engaged in meaningful interactions, which significantly improves their language acquisition.

Aldera' article highlighted that "the Saudi EFL learners show a negative attitude toward learning English as a foreign language" (p. 223) since most of the contents of their coursebooks are in conflict with their culture (Aldera, 2017). A group of Barcelona-based teachers interviewed by the author all agreed that effective English coursebook's content should be culture-friendly and should contain input from local language textbooks writers. While it is crucial for learners to be aware of the target culture, most students are more open to an intercultural approach where the coursebooks contain events and incidents about both their culture and that of the target language.

Because most EFL textbooks are not relevant to learners' contexts, being able to effectively select the right textbook is critical. Liu has published an article about using the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) method to select an effective EFL textbook. The author pinpointed criteria related to cultural topics, information, activities, and criteria related to the dimension of teaching aid (Liu, 2016). The author pointed out,

The ultimate goal of the contents should be developing in students an intercultural attitude by raising their awareness of difference, encouraging them to show respect and emphasizing the benefits of being open minded to cultural variations (p. 848).

Like Aldera, Liu emphasized the importance of providing cultural contents from both the target culture and that of the learner and offering students opportunities to be aware of and embrace differences. Reflection sessions that allow learners to consider their cultural

assumptions and enrich their learning experiences can help them develop a deeper understanding, solid critical awareness, and intercultural competence to boost their language learning. Cultural topics have great influence on the learning of English and should be meticulously chosen.

An article about helping Saudi English learners develop oral proficiency really resonates with the ELLs' situation in Haiti. The author suggested assisting learners in discovering their own way of learning and their sense of awareness as well as allowing them to become actors of the learning process as effective ways to boost their skills (Alharbi, 2015). One insight from the article is about having students do weekly reflective reports on how they practice English outside the classroom to perform authentic tasks like ordering food at a restaurant, read the news, and other activities via presentations in the classroom. It sounds like this kind of activity can nurture students' autonomy and agency as they use the language outside the classroom. The shift from dependency to autonomy fosters intrinsic motivation, a key element in effective language learning.

Alharbi pointed out that, with respect to communicative tasks, authenticity is an important factor not only in selecting curriculum topics but also in picking real world tasks that are appropriate for the Saudi context. For example, responding to a party invitation is very irrelevant to this context but writing a CV or completing a job application would be relevant (Graves, 2000). Accordingly, the curriculum should address practical skills. Textbook activities are sometimes irrelevant to learners' lives and cultures and can thus be boring and counterproductive, so incorporating learners' context-specific content into lessons can significantly make them more engaged and invested in practice activities since they are more meaningful.

EFL textbooks that do not meet the learners' needs can greatly demotivate students to learn the target language (Aghazadeh 2015). For instance, a textbook that is grammar-focused will not be appealing to a learner who wants to develop their communicative skills. Learners generally enjoy task-based activities and view the teaching of speaking as being very helpful for their learning of English (Aghazadeh 2015). An assessment of an English textbook used in an Iranian high school revealed that learners considered its functions and content to be inadequate and thus not conducive to their oral proficiency development (Farrokhi & Saadi, 2013). The educational view of the coursebook can impact both the class and the learning process (Sheldon 1988). Some authors suggest that it may be best not to use a specific textbook at all (Gholami & al 2012). A teacher's perceptions of a coursebook on facets like accuracy, fluency, and motivation can be diametrically different from their students' as revealed in findings about learners' opinions about the textbook used in the Iranian context.

It is crucial that teachers carefully and skillfully select their coursebook if they are to really help students boost their speaking and listening proficiency (Diepenbroek, Lori G. and Derwing, Tracey M. 2013). Oral fluency-oriented tasks are usually not dominant in most English textbooks. Vellenga (2004) pointed out that "the distribution of speech act types across ESL and EFL textbooks did not appear to be patterned, nor based on frequency of speech act occurrence in natural language, and often seems counterintuitive" (p. 9).

One reason that coursebook writers do not incorporate adequate fluency-related tasks into textbooks may be that they assume teachers will devise other tools to help their students develop fluency (Diepenbroek, Lori G. and Derwing, Tracey M. 2013). The authors pointed out, "Generally speaking, these integrated textbooks were not very useful for the development of oral fluency..." (p. 16). Rossiter et al suggested using other ways to enable learners to improve their

fluency than relying on a coursebook (2010). Context-specific lessons serve as an alternative and constitute effective scaffolding tools since they are relevant to the learners' context and thus require less cognitive efforts.

### **Shaping Learners' Contributions in the Classroom**

Learners' input is invaluable for a vivid English teaching-learning process to happen and their contributions provide lots of context-specific content. The following interactional features can encourage learners to generate input in the classroom and provide opportunities for participation: scaffolding, requests for clarification, and confirmation checks (Cancino 2017). Learners' participation in the classroom can be an effective source of learning and their contributions to lessons are great resources. This social aspect of learning is backed by numerous language learning theories and approaches (Walsh 2006). Shaping the learners' contributions involves listening actively, recasting (repairing a student's response and then send it back to them), scaffolding, asking for clarification, and pushing to learners to generate more input (Walsh, 2006, 2013).

### **Storytelling for Fluency and beyond**

Storytelling is an effective way to help learners develop fluency, work on their beliefs in fatalism, nurture their agency, and strengthen classroom community (Campbell and Hlusek , 2015). Campbell and Hlusek highlighted the effectiveness of storytelling in improving oral and reading fluency. Storytelling allows learners to develop their listening skills as well and offers them chances to respond to reading texts and interact with one another. Retelling stories helps students to develop intelligibility, an indispensable element for fluency development. According to the article, "Activities built on storytelling and talk can provide practice in speaking and listening skills" (Campbell and Hlusek 2015, p. 158). Storytelling nurtures students' creative

skills and agency as they prepare to retell a story and strive to find the best way to perform it. They also have an opportunity to reflect on the story and learn valuable lessons that can favorably influence their cultural beliefs. Team storytelling projects can really be instrumental in establishing a solid and productive classroom culture.

Folk narrative is also an effective technique to provide students with context-specific content to bolster their fluency development, instill in them productive cultural beliefs, and optimize their language learning process since, as Masoni (2018) stated,

Working with folk narrative in the EFL classroom means providing our students with language in context, language that is relevant and meaningful, and language that they can use to describe their personal, social, and professional lives (p. 640).

Narrative offers language learners an avenue to process everyday events, reflect on their beliefs, and consider social norms or other facets about their community and themselves. Studies have shown that folk narratives can help improve learners' oral skills since they have to act out the stories.

Because there are countless English translations of international folk tales, teachers can access lots of resources that are appropriate to their context for their intended goals. Masoni (2018) pointed out that Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Cornwall, the US, Australia, and New Zealand have stories that are similar to those of other countries. Students could compare stories from other cultures to stories in their own and draw insights about the target language and other cultures. Masoni's article highlighted how effectively narratives can be used to teach complex grammar structures and how teachers can adapt folk texts by changing the tenses.

Folk stories tap into learners' cognition, imagination, and emotions, and this connection makes the target language more relevant to their lives, which can boost their intrinsic motivation.

As Masoni (2008) put it, “More recent theories of language learning strongly link cognition, emotion, and motivation as part of a single mechanism, which dynamically propels learning” (p. 645). Also, folk tales help activate language learners’ critical thinking, indispensable for higher order learning in the target language. Since folk tales are full of metaphors, they can facilitate the learning of idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs (Yasuda 2010).

Stories are effective teaching tools in that they provide answers to students’ core questions and allow them to think more clearly about cultural and societal issues. Masoni (2018) highlighted that “The structure of stories allows for language to penetrate at a more profound level” (p. 651). Folk tales which are relevant to the learners’ context provides an anchor for them and allow them to connect the target language to their realities. Masoni argued that “Narratives that are perceived as relevant activate an inner dialogue in our minds” (p. 652).

Jokes, gossip, anecdotes, tall tales, movies, and other stories related to the learners’ everyday lives can all be used as folk narratives (conversational narratives) (Masoni 2018) [and context-specific-like content]. Narratives can thus be used by learners to address community issues and to exchange ideas about common interests. To connect the target language to students’ lives, teachers must use topics that are related to students’ realities, and folk narrative content can effectively serve this purpose. As Masoni put it, “Oral narratives provide an organic and holistic means of introducing language and language use to our students, and for this reason context is most important” (p. 657).

## **MY ENGLISH LEARNING AND TEACHING BIOGRAPHY**

### **My English Learning Journey**

I have been drawn to learning languages ever since my first English class in secondary school. At that time, the grammar-translation method was in vogue in Haiti, so students had to

study lots of grammar rules and learn how to translate sentences from English into French and vice versa. Knowing lots of grammar rules and being able to use them accurately and provide exact translations was a sign that the learner had mastered the material. I spent seven years in high school learning English through the grammar translation method and came to believe that the best way to learn a foreign language was through studying its content rather than through using it to interact with other people. As Ellis (2015) put it, “Learners form 'mini theories' consisting of the beliefs that they hold about language learning” (p. 38).

It strikes me how the teachers’ approach can shape students’ beliefs about how to acquire a foreign language. As I said above, spurred by my high school language teachers’ grammar-translation approach, I came to believe that the best way to acquire a foreign language is through studying hard to learn as much content as possible. I recall spending one of my Christmas breaks studying lists of words from a very small pocket dictionary, hoping that increasing my vocabulary would positively impact my overall language skills. Since practice activities were nonexistent in high school language classes, I thought that using the language to interact with peers was not necessary. Therefore, I never practiced speaking with peers, and as a result never developed my speaking skills.

Studying grammar and vocabulary considerably helped me improve my writing: I could write grammatically correct sentences. Also, I was able to remarkably increase my vocabulary, so much that one day one of my peers at Ecole Normale Supérieure (a teacher-training college in Haiti) observed, “When you manage to accurately put together all the words [and grammar rules] you know, you will be able to speak English fluently.” I was a freshman at that time. It was obvious that, with all my vocabulary and grammar knowledge, I could not speak English fluently. It was so disappointing that I was not able to speak English proficiently even after

having studied it for nine years. Typical feelings of powerlessness often trigger or solidify beliefs in fatalism and destiny.

After I finished high school, I went to the American University of the Caribbean to learn how to speak English. I took a placement test and was placed in Level Two due to my performance. The class met for eight hours a week and during the classes, students learned English through engaging in communicative activities. I started to develop some fluency through practicing with peers both inside and outside the classroom. I would participate in a conversation club held at the university every Friday afternoon for two hours. During club sessions, students had a chance to discuss interesting topics on which they shared their views and exchanged ideas. I came to develop new beliefs about how to learn a foreign language and felt that the best way to develop fluency was through using the language to interact with other people and that practice was key.

As a student at the American university, I became aware of the importance of listening. In high school classes, there were no listening and speaking activities. I could notice how difficult it was for me to understand spoken English and was determined to overcome this weakness. I would listen to *Transworld Radio* shows and would pick up some English words here and there at the beginning. I would listen to the English radio shows every night in my free time. How delighted I was when I was able to pick up some full sentences! I kept practicing listening to the programs until I was able to understand entire shows.

Listening to English, Spanish, and French podcasts is one activity that I still love to do. I usually download VOA (The Voice of America) podcasts which I listen to while ironing my clothes and exercising. Listening to foreign languages (French, Spanish, and English) has thus become one of my favorite hobbies to these days. I wish that affordances like the Internet and

ESL/EFL apps had been accessible in my context when I was studying English. That would have been so helpful!

Learning to write opinion essays was one of my remarkable language learning experiences. The teacher used a very hands-on approach to teaching students how to write. During the first classes, he taught us how to make an outline and organize our ideas, how to use transition words and phrases to build coherence, and review mechanics and structures. Once he was sure that we were ready, he would have us practice writing five-paragraph opinion essays, offer feedback, and immediately grade the papers in class. The practice and feedback sessions significantly helped me to improve my writing. For me, that hands-on writing teaching technique seemed very effective and efficient although there was still room for improvement. He could have had peers check one another's work and exchange feedback. To activate students' thinking, he could have had us do some prewriting. Since writing is a process, he could have had us write several drafts of an essay until we could produce more refined versions. Even if his proactive method was not perfect, I feel that practicing writing and receiving feedback right away strikingly helped me to improve my essay-writing skills.

As I conclude my English learning story, I would like to highlight that, though many Haitians believe in destiny and luck, my parents taught me that I needed a good education to be successful in life, which is the reason that I strove and used so much personal agency and made lots of investment to be successful in my language learning journey.

### **My English Teaching Process at the American University of the Caribbean**

**My Students.** I have been teaching English at the American University of the Caribbean in Les Cayes, Haiti, since January 2002. Most of my students have not traveled outside of Haiti and do not have much knowledge about the American culture. Many of them are from the rural

area and the suburbs. These learners are mostly high school aged students and young professional working adults who are learning English because they hope to visit the United States someday, study at a US university, or get a job promotion. Their previous language learning experience happened in high school where they were expected or even required to be quiet in class, listen to the teacher, take notes, and ask questions if need be. Also, in most secondary schools, students usually work individually in the classroom and cooperation is rarely encouraged. In the ESL classroom, things are quite different, and they are required to participate in class, work in pairs and in groups, contribute their input, hear listening texts, cooperate with peers, provide peer feedback, become members of a community, and be verbally and physically active in class. Therefore, ensuring that this transition goes smoothly and consistently is vital for the learners to be able to fully develop their language skills, especially their speaking, which is their top priority.

**The Coursebook.** The textbook series we have been using in class entitled *Standout* is designed to be used to teach English to immigrants studying English in the United States. For this reason, some exercises in the textbook, whose content is utilized as the class syllabus, remain problematic because they are not relevant to the students' context.

Before I started the MATESOL program at SIT Graduate Institute, I had been grappling with students' complaining that the textbook is used too much in class and that they wanted to have activities in class wherein they can have discussions about context-specific topics and more practice activities. The new skills I have gained from the MATESOL program have enabled me to create a new classroom culture that responds to their desires to get involved in discussions around their favorite topics, allows them to have a voice in deciding on some classroom content, and has them participate in debates and group discussions on their desired topics. This has really

changed the class dynamics and students have demonstrated more enthusiasm and personal agency and become more invested in their learning.

**Taking on Diverse Roles in the Classroom.** To establish a new culture which is more conducive to optimal EFL learning, I have to assume a variety of roles in the classroom. I am sometimes a catalyst, trying to change behaviors from previous learning experience and cultural beliefs in destiny. These behaviors are so ingrained and embedded that they are recurrent. So, I am sometimes a coach, and as such have to monitor their habits, intervene, and give advice when there is a problem. Occasionally, I am a counselor, organizing reflection sessions to provide advice and have them reflect on major classroom activities and issues. Other times, I am a mentor, making them aware of their hidden talents and how they can use themselves and their classmates as valuable resources. I am also a guide, leading them to the new territory of the EFL world and show them how to successfully navigate it. Finally, I am also their English teacher who has to teach them new skills and provide new knowledge.

**Creating a Classroom Culture.** In the secondary school setting, most of the time, students work individually and learn to rely on themselves and their teacher alone. They need to be made aware that their classmates are valuable resources that they can use to optimize their learning. They should also learn to view making mistakes as a normal part of learning a foreign language, since in the secondary school culture, errors are often shunned since they are viewed as a lack of intelligence. Students tend to laugh at people who make mistakes. Students should also be made aware of the importance of being active and supportive members of the classroom community. Since a lot of learners have some belief in destiny, I have to make sure that they come to believe they can become fluent in English if they put in adequate efforts and use effective learning strategies. Therefore, I often hold regular reflection sessions for my students so

they can share their feelings about the new classroom setting and practices and fix any difficulties.

**Anticipating and Adapting the Textbook Content to Students' Context.** As I have already pointed out, the textbook *Standout* is designed for immigrants learning English in the United States. Therefore, it contains plenty of materials that are not related to the context of students learning English in a country where English is not the dominant tongue. To illustrate, I remember having done everything possible to help my Level Two students understand an exercise about interpreting street directions. For that exercise, the students had to listen and follow street directions to locate specific places on a city map. Anticipating that students will have difficulties, I provided quite a lot of scaffolding before and during the task. I had them listen to the listening text several times so that they had more than one chance to get the correct answers. Even so, most of the students were unsuccessful.

Looking back, I realized that they would not have been able to successfully do the exercise even if it had been in Creole, their mother tongue. The problem is that the activity is not relevant to their culture or to their previous learning experiences. In Haiti, students do not learn how to give and interpret street directions at school, let alone how to read a map. They learn that at home or in other casual social interactions, and the language Haitians use to give street directions is very informal and much more different from the way Americans give directions. So, those concepts are unknown to them. Haitians do not usually use street names when giving directions and the language used is not very specified. For instance, "They may say, "The church is across from the park (I guess you know quite well where the park is located.)." They try to help you locate a place you do not know by connecting it to the location of a place that they

believe that everyone knows, or they may suggest that you ask someone when you arrive at a certain area.

I do not have much experience in adapting textbook content, but I think that it is important that teachers anticipate, problematize, and adapt irrelevant activities to their students' context. Content analysis is all the more crucial when the textbook is written by authors who have no idea about the environment where it is being used. Certain exercises and tasks should be modified to fit the students' previous learning experiences and backgrounds and respond to their needs and desires. Textbook activities are tools to be used to help students achieve their educational goals and should not be construed as prescriptions. Activities and tasks that are not relevant can often be more of a hindrance to learning. I think that if a textbook task cannot be effectively adapted, altered, or replaced, it should be skipped for the sake of satisfying students' real learning needs.

**Incorporating Context Specific Content into Task-Based Activities.** My students always want me to utilize topics, lessons, and contents that are more relevant to their lives. Many of them want to be able to spend most of the class time practicing conversational English wherein they can discuss local trending topics. Because the book is viewed as a syllabus and teachers are required to cover its content in twelve weeks, they cannot satisfy students' desires. Therefore, at the beginning of the course, I always talk to my students about the situation and decide along with them what is feasible. We usually agree that I will be using the book during most class time and that twenty-five percent of the class time will be dedicated to using context-specific topics that is often related to the goals of the lessons.

The Level Two book consists of eight units and each one is composed of five lessons plus a three-page review lesson. The following are the themes of the units: Everyday Life, Shopping,

Food and Nutrition, Housing, Our Community, Health, Work, and Goals and Lifelong Learning. We meet for two hours every day with a ten-minute break four times a week. I basically cover at least a lesson every day so that I can cover the book contents in twelve weeks. I usually have them work in groups of three or four to discuss a context-specific topic that is related either to the theme of the unit or the goal of the lesson being covered. For instance, for a lesson about nutrition, I have individual students write down a list of the foods they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then I have them work in groups to talk about their daily diets, compare them, and discuss what foods they like and dislike, who has the best diet and why they think so, which food most of them frequently eat and why it is so popular, and which foods are popular in different regions in Haiti. But, sometimes, I have them choose their own trending topic, which is sometimes not related to the lesson. For instance, in one class, students suggested that I have them discuss about the then political situation in Haiti.

For advanced students, I alternate between group discussions and debates followed by a plenary. For instance, in one TOEFL class, I had students debate over whether they prefer to raise their children in the country or the city. The rebuttal part of the debate was so lively that I had difficulties putting an end to the class. They just kept on arguing. They got a chance to think in English and fully practice the language. For the debate, I do not give them a choice about which side to support, but I tell them that they need to support their opinions with three logical reasons and provide examples and details to support them.

For a group discussion, I feel that the following framework can work pretty well. First, after making sure they understand the topic, each student has to reflect on the topic for ten minutes and do research using dictionary apps on their smartphone or on the Internet about the language they will need to express their ideas. They then share their findings with their peers for

five minutes. Next, they discuss the topic with their group members for about fifteen minutes. After that, we have a plenary where volunteers share their takes about the topic with the class. Finally, we have a reflection session about the activity where they express what they feel, what worked, what did not work, and so on.

If the topic is a little challenging, they usually struggle a lot before they can begin to express their ideas. But even so, during the reflection session, they always say that they enjoyed the activity and that it was a rewarding learning experience. I usually take some notes about some recurrent mistakes relating to either pronunciation or grammar or word order that I have the class reflect on and correct later.

**Reflection on Learning.** My students and I usually have a reflection session after they finish a group discussion on a context-specific topic or any other challenging task. That is the appropriate time for us to check what helped and hindered learning, refocus, and develop new perspectives. I take advantage of this opportunity to congratulate them on their efforts, investment, and personal agency, diagnose the learning process, discuss effective learning strategies, do counselling, actively listen to them, and note what actions to take next to improve the learning process. I also get to use my personal agency: I have to become a co-learner and listen carefully to my students telling me what I should do to improve my teaching! The learners have a chance to use their agency as well and have a voice in their learning process, dispel misconceptions, reconsider counter-productive beliefs, and perceive new learning possibilities. They are always enthusiastic about the reflection sessions and openly share their ideas and feelings. These reflection sessions help us learn a lot about one another, build a stronger community, and improve the class dynamics.

## LOOKING FORWARD

In reflection sessions conducted with EFL students at the American University of the Caribbean in Haiti about the teaching-learning process, they always express their desires for the lessons to include more context-specific content and call for more free practice activities in the classroom where they can actually take actions and use what they learn in real-world activities to develop their speaking skills. Therefore, based on my teaching experiences, I strongly believe that the Task-Based Language Teaching approach coupled with other methods could best respond to their needs. Task-based learning is all the more effective that it can enhance students' motivation, which can compel them to use their agency. The latter, in turn, enables them to develop their autonomy and to be more proactive. It is striking how Action-Based Teaching coupled with TBLT and other approaches can make the learning process more alive and meaningful, which significantly enhances identity growth, learners' investment, and fluency development as the learner becomes more agentic, motivated, creative, and autonomous.

Since beliefs in fatalism is prevalent in the Haitian culture, which can hinder learning because learners tend to neglect making adequate efforts and rely on destiny for success in their fluency development, they need to be addressed so as to establish a new culture where learners believe their progress depends entirely on using the right learning strategies and making adequate investment. Folk tales, narrative, and storytelling in TBLT not only allow students to reflect and reconsider their cultural beliefs, they also help them to fully use their agency to take initiative, harness their creativity, use context-specific language, tap into their emotions, holistically shape their new identities, and intensify their motivation in a meaningful way.

Lessons content is indispensable for the teaching-learning process. However, for optimal learning to happen, it should be selected in light of the learners' culture, needs, and desires. The

content can boost their enthusiasm or negatively affect their attitude. When learners perceive a connection between the lessons and their everyday lives and context, they are more likely to become engaged and invested in the learning process. That is why it is crucial for teachers to view the coursebook contents not as a prescription but as material they should use discriminately and as complement to other resources which are relevant to their students' context. Learners are more prone to use their agency and invest in their learning when the content and class activities relate to their culture and backgrounds.

I have had some experience incorporating context-specific content into my lessons; however, I have a lot to learn so that I can develop more effective context-specific material. Even so, I have been very satisfied with students' engagement in and enthusiasm about these lessons. International headlines that are trending locally are also great content that can be utilized in speaking activities to boost students' fluency. In fact, during a couple of weeks when the COVID-19 pandemic started to become a major part of local trending news, even if it had not been detected yet in Haiti, I created task-based thirty-minute speaking activities around the topic for each class.

The activities were diverse: have students do research about the disease online in groups as homework and share findings with the class, group discussions about the causes, prevention, and what to do if one contracts the virus, roles plays of a mock interview between a journalist and a doctor, and volunteer presentations. It is intriguing how students were engaged and agentic and enthusiastic about the different activities. Interestingly, lots of students believed the virus would never get to Haiti thinking that good fortune would keep it away, a testimony of their beliefs in luck and fatalism. One student told me that talking too much about COVID-19 could cause it to get to Haiti. Another student said that he would commit suicide if he contracted the

disease; the class and I empathetically reassured him and encouraged him to change his mind telling him that his loved ones and caring medical professionals would take good care of him and that contracting the illness does not mean he would be abandoned to die.

Regarding using storytelling and folk narratives to help students develop their fluency, I recall teaching English to a small group of children aged eight to eleven at an orphanage in Les Cayes at the beginning of my career. The group of American missionaries for whom I was working gave me a bunch of fairy tales books (Little Red Riding Hood, Pocahontas, etc.) to use for the course. I planned my classes around these stories to help the children develop their speaking skills, the focus of the course. The tales really kept the children engaged in the lessons and tapped into their emotions and enthusiasm, which greatly enabled them to make significant investment and progress. As a result, their speaking skill greatly improved, and the missionaries were impressed by their oral proficiency! I do not recall using folk tales in other occasions; however, as of now I will make storytelling and folk narratives part of my teaching practices.

### **CONCLUSION**

I have developed the above framework based on my experiences learning and teaching English and other languages, my students' views about the learning process in general and their expectations in particular, what I have learned from the MATESOL program at SIT Graduate Institute, and the literature. There is, unfortunately, not much literature regarding how EFL students' cultural beliefs in fatalism and destiny impact their learning and fluency development, a topic that needs to be explored since such deeply ingrained beliefs are pervasive and worldwide, especially in developing countries, and do affect learners' attitudes and behaviors and the English learning process.

From my language learning experience, I posit that learners' identity and intrinsic motivation are strongly linked to personal agency, their investment in their learning, and fluency development. Since I was strongly motivated as an English learner and my dream was to become proficient in English, I took lots of initiative and invested plenty of time and energy in my learning to improve my skills. Among other activities, I listened to radio shows and podcasts and read the news every day, which remarkably helped improve my language skills. It is clear that students have different degrees of motivation and that the extent to which they use their personal agency and invest in their learning depends on the latter.

Therefore, it is crucial that teachers find a way to harness EFL students' motivation through incorporating context-specific and engaging contents – folk narratives, geography, history, gossips, local trending stories, the news, and so on – to connect the learning of English to the learners' lives and their imagined identities and communities. As a former English learner, I personally missed that connection, which did not make learning a foreign language the enriching and meaningful life experience it was supposed to be and seriously slowed down my progress. As Dreier (2015), Schraube and Marvakis (2016) pointed out, “Learning is an integral part of persons' conduct of everyday life including the development of their knowledge and agency” (p. 437).

Also, having learners reflect and comment on their individual learning processes and the rhythm of the class and engage in tasks which allow them to perceive and take advantage of affordances and personal agency can significantly enable them to optimize their learning both inside and outside the classroom. Reflection helps learners develop their awareness of how they process their own learning. It also nurtures their mindfulness as well since it offers them an opportunity to take a pause during the learning process to analyze their own feelings and

cognitive processes to see how learning actually unfolds and listen to their inner voice while using their outer voice to impact the class dynamics. Reflection sessions enable teachers to learn a lot and develop their awareness and mindfulness, among other traits, as well, to improve their teaching.

As an English learner, I recall learning lots and lots of material by myself, which helped hone my skills. Therefore, I believe that task- and action-based teaching and learning coupled with other approaches can, if appropriately situated, greatly help EFL learners improve their oral fluency in contexts like mine. Utilizing approaches that have learners reconsider counter-productive cultural beliefs while sturdily connecting lessons content and teaching approaches to students' context, culture, discourses, backgrounds, identities, emotions, and routines can significantly help improve their overall EFL skills, especially their oral fluency.

It is obvious that a fundamental shift in teacher education is required so that teachers are trained to reflect on their own learning, develop their own agency as learners, and use their own personal agency to adapt and create curriculums and contents that respond to their students' needs and that fit their context and wider culture. Teachers will thus be equipped to use and develop the tools they need to be able to boost their students' learning and empower them to develop their own personal agency to not only be able to improve their overall language skills, particularly their oral fluency, but also to make a difference in their own lives and their communities.

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