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## **A Scrutiny of Pakistani Digital Classroom as an Extramural Language Learning Ecology**

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### **Abstract**

Recent years, witnessed an intriguing shift in the interest of the learners where they are engrossed in online learning and Pakistan is not any different in this respect. Ergo, this paper scrutinizes Pakistani digital classroom as an extramural language learning ecology of the SLA learners. Sundqvist (2009) has used the metaphor of 'Extramural English' for all the teaching activities conducted beyond the traditional classroom walls. Hereby, the digital space described in this project is zoom classroom which creates an extramural language learning ecology for the Pakistani SLA learners. Moreover, zoom ecology scrutinized here is about the online session of English spoken class based on the span of forty days. Another novel aspect highlighted in this article is that of 'Language Learning Beyond Classroom' which emphasizes the importance of out of the class learning and its contribution in second language acquisition. The critical analysis of extramural digital classroom space is accomplished by applying the theory of language

learning ecology (Palfreyman, 2014). The significance of this work lies in the detailed analysis of digital extramural learning space of the Pakistani learners, the contribution of language learning beyond classroom in second language acquisition and the construction of extramural language learning ecology framework for the future research on online classroom as a digital, multimodal space.

**Key words:** Extramural, language learning ecology, zoom meeting, language learning beyond classroom

### **Introduction**

Since 2020, most of the trends in education sectors have seen a shift towards distant and online learning due to COVID-19 and Pakistan too, got influenced from this distant and online learning system. It was way too difficult to manage online system in such under developed country but to accept the change was inevitable. Pandemic left no choice for the educational sectors but to adhere to the virtual learning to meet safety protocols (Tweissi et al., 2022). Therefore, a series of online classes started through a digital platform called Zoom which also surged popularity in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, English is taught as the second language from kindergarten, still 70% of the students are not able to speak or write it, even at the graduate level. Therefore, the trend of online classes generated numerous short courses to facilitate such learners of English and the ones in vogue are English Spoken class, Grammar class and Creative Writing class. This article is about one such course on Zoom which is conducted online in Pakistan. It was an English spoken

course of 40 days and the aim of this paper is to describe that digital online space from the theoretical perspective of language learning ecology.

The objective of this paper is to describe zoom as the digital online Pakistani learning site from the lens of language learning ecology. Therefore, online zoom setting is not mere location but involves other dimensions of LLBC (Language Learning Beyond Classroom) like formality, pedagogy and locus of control (Benson, 2011, p. 13). Thus, the location is online virtual classes on zoom meeting, formality is deliberately kept informal to provide friendly ambiance, with first author as the teacher and other authors as passive observers in the class. Online teaching material is employed to design a course outline based on learners' need to gear up their English speaking skills. However, their locus of control was internal, as they were provided with freedom of choice between activities. What became an overall advantage for them, was the notion of joining the session because of their intrinsic motivation to speak fluent English. They were 8 learners of both genders, creating an interactive online ecology and their ages ranging from 18-22 years.

### Literature Review

Barron (2006) defines a learning ecology as the set of contexts in virtual or physical spaces, providing learning opportunities. Palfreyman (2014) has used metaphor of ecology for language learning which possesses characteristics of interdependence, dynamic relationship, resources and historical perspective. A language learning ecology having these characteristics, serves well for the learners sharing similar context. Hereby, the context of learning is online spoken English course, joining distant learners on a single platform.

'Extramural English' is another metaphor to describe English language learning that encapsulates all types of contact with English beyond the classroom walls (Sundqvist, 2009). Zoom is the site of extramural English ecology for the Pakistani learners interested in learning English outside the classroom. In case of an online spoken course, a language learning ecology that works well is a 'self-directed' or 'naturalistic' learning of English (Benson, 2011). Therefore, the spoken course offered on zoom had the communicative approach with the direct involvement of students in individual speaking activities or group discussions, creating a naturalistic extramural English learning ecology.

A learning ecology is interactive and the interaction of learner with his environment gives rise to learning opportunities (Palfreyman, 2014). The interaction between the learners and their environment depends upon the resources which the learners must recognize and use accordingly. Palfreyman (2006) further explains the types of resources that a learner can use i.e., material or social resources. Material resources for the online zoom ecology are laptops, tablets or cell phones; social resource for the online class is the contact between the teacher and learners. The presence of these resources don't guarantee that the learner is always able to successfully learn due to other important factors called affordances that come along these resources.

Affordances are set of possibilities and opportunities in the environment that are available to the individuals, independent of their abilities to perceive them (McGrenere & Ho, 2000). Gibson (1979) has defined affordance as "what the environment offers to a particular organism" (p. 127). Moreover, these affordances are reciprocal to the learner's perception and needs in a

particular context. Thereby, an online zoom class also comes up with some digital affordances for the learners. Barton and Potts (2013) state the idea of digital affordances as, “digital mediated spaces afford language learners with linguistic resources” (p. 818).

In addition to learning resources, affordances and interaction, an ecology of language learning includes learners and space relationship, creating an interactive environment. Gibson (1979) relates the relationship of space and physical objects to the relationship of environment and the living organisms creating an ecology. Hence, concept of an environment explains the ‘where’ of language learning setting in a holistic manner (Benson, 2021). He further explains two perspectives regarding environment as areal and individual. An areal perspective is about the geography of an environment and can be any boundary on the map, whereas, the individual perspective is about the settings configured by an individual learner where he goes for learning (Benson, 2021, p. 91).

Although, the theoretical perspective chosen for this paper is language learning ecology but in digital learning ecology, space is pivotal for areal and individual interaction. Therefore, a shared space of digital interaction paves way for multimodal learning through screen connecting global geographical spaces (Lee & Roger, 2023, p. 3). There are four aspects central to the digital space; integrated geography, global networking, screen space and multimodal digital media circulation (Lee & Roger, 2023). Integrated geography connects and integrate online users in one digital space. Global networking provides site for the flow of interactions without any physical proximity (Castells, 2010). Screen space is a visual representation of digital experiences in a space (Saether & Bull, 2020). Multimodal digital media circulation utilizes various platforms

for transnational communication (Benson, 2016). All these aspects regarding digital space as an extramural language learning ecology can be summed up in a single framework for the critical discussion of zoom classroom of Pakistani SLA (second language acquisition) learners.

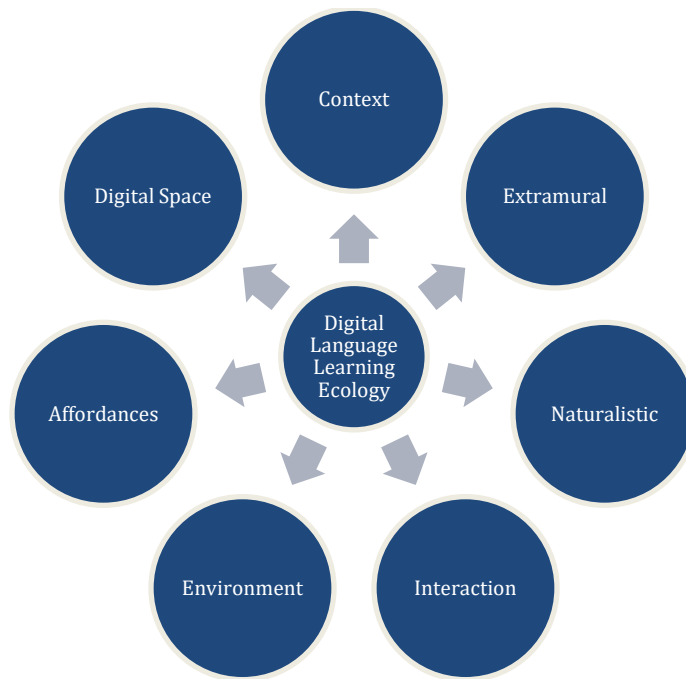


Figure.1. Extramural Language Learning Ecology Framework

### Critical Analysis and Discussion

The figure represents the advertisement of the spoken English course, offered on zoom. The setting involved the online zoom class but it was campaigned on other social media app called WhatsApp. WhatsApp is an easy and convenient way of connecting with the people, so the number of desired learners were gathered by putting this on status of the first author who

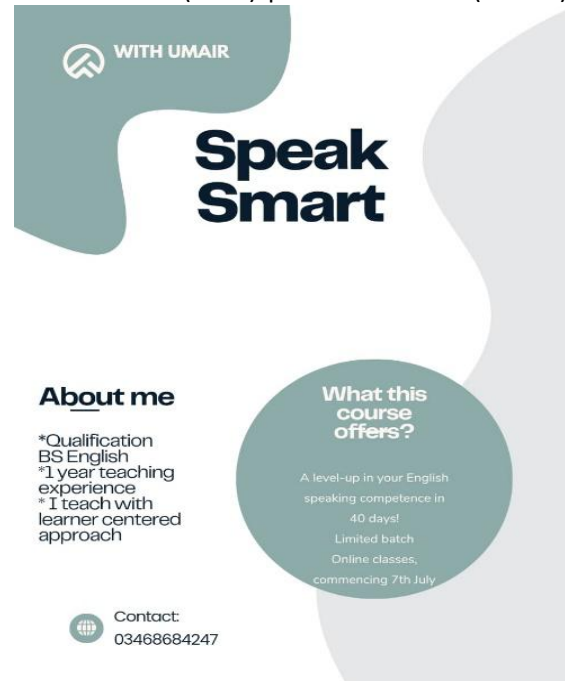
served as the online instructor. A WhatsApp group was made in order to give instructions regarding the activities and to know about learner's queries or issues at the end of every zoom session.

(Figure.2. Online Brochure)

As, the aim of this paper is to describe zoom from the perspective of digital and extramural language learning ecology, so the outcomes of this online course is not shared here. The study is delimited to

the description of the extramural zoom ecology. Furthermore, at the end of critical analysis, screenshots of the feedback from two of the students is attached with their consent to show authenticity of the online spoken course.

The different set of contexts that motivated learners to join the virtual zoom session had one thing in common, i.e., speaking anxiety and lack of speaking competence in English language. Learners having different educational backgrounds united under this platform with shared context of improving their speaking skills. An important aspect that is highlighted in the brochure is that the course will help to level up English speaking competence and will not make anyone proficient in speaking in just 40 days. This idea to level up speaking competence, comes from the input hypothesis of Krashen (1977), stating the input provided to the learners must be according to their level and somewhat beyond to make the learning process comprehensible and challenging, with the formula "i+1". Hence, the course was offered keeping this outcome in



mind with the context of removing English speaking anxiety of Pakistani SLA learners. A layout of activities was designed for the context of improving speaking skills of the learners, but certain amendments were made after observing the current level of speaking proficiency and analyzing the needs of the learners.

Zoom classes were the online site for learning of 'extramural' (Sundqvist, 2009) and 'naturalistic English' (Benson, 2011). It was the experience for 8 learners to learn beyond their traditional classroom walls and to be naturally involve in the speaking ambiance provided through zoom space. The self-directed or naturalistic learning involves the action where learners learn with intrinsic motivation by taking the charge of their own learning and being responsible for it. This concept is similar to learner's autonomy where according to Holec (1981), learner is responsible and takes the charge of one's learning. The learners joined this session were self-directed as they needed to be communicatively proficient in English due to various academic and professional purposes. For some, it was for their job requirement, interviews and for some it was for the sake of classroom presentations. A natural way of stirring one's interest is intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and they were all readily motivated to learn.

Interaction is the biggest aspect of digital language learning ecology, as there is no physical proximity and direct contact of the learners and teacher. As Palfreyman (2014) asserts that interaction of learner and his environment produces learning opportunities. Learning emerges when learners recognize the available resources that Palfreyman (2014) has described as material and social resources. The material resources were different for the learners according to the availability of resources like cellphones, tablets and laptops etc. These material resources



were joining the learners at the single digital zoom site where social resource was the communication between the teacher and learners and learners with peers, creating an organic extramural ecology of learning. The activities for interaction were designed progressively for 40 days. Starting from introductory sessions then speaking on a given topic assigned for preparing at home, picture description, critical thinking and developing themes from the ambiguous ideas in pictures, role plays, situational speaking activities, communication gap activities, group discussions and lastly assigning random topic and giving a minute to gather points and speaking on it for at least a minute. These activities developed social bonding on zoom making an interactive, living ecology of learning.

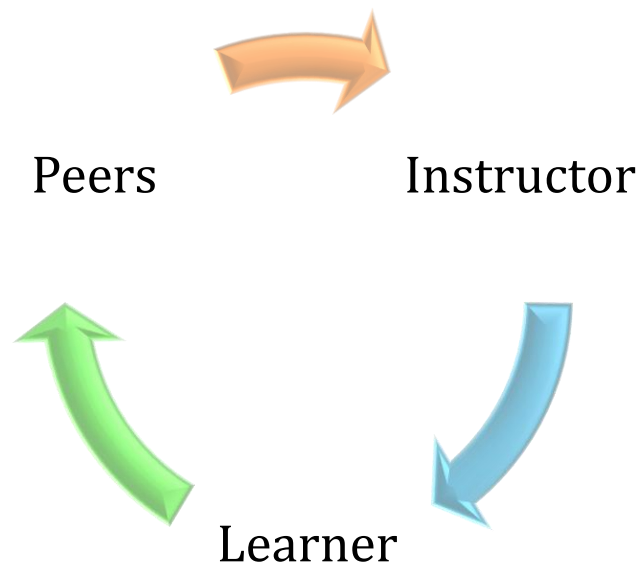


Figure.3. Social Interaction Flow in Zoom Space

According to Gibson (1979), affordances are set of resources available to the learners in an environment, irrespective of their ability to perceive them. Thereby, a zoom ambiance comes

up with a set of same digital affordances or opportunities for every learner, independent of how each individual makes use of them. The digital affordances of zoom which were part of the class were media sharing, multimodal learning, chatroom for instant queries, hand raising. On one hand, these affordances made the flow of material and positive social interaction in the class but on the other hand, there were certain constraints regarding zoom sessions. It is common practice in Pakistani zoom classrooms to conduct classes without video conferencing, only through voice conferencing due to family reservations for girls. The class was having 6 female and 2 male students, therefore, the class was conducted only through voice conferencing. Still, it wasn't a big issue for the class because the learners, as mentioned earlier were self-directed. But for the learners in zoom meetings who are in their teens, negative use of only voice conferencing makes it a constraint. They sleep during classes, never turn on their mics to reply teachers or try to distract class through doodling on screen. Video conferencing sometimes is anxious or tiring but mostly it makes the learner attentive, composed and well informed and not making use of it is a constraint for Pakistani online classes.

Benson (2021) explains 'where' of the language learning ecology through areal and individual perspective of environment. It is the setting or a place where an individual goes for learning. In case of zoom ecology, there is an integrated geographical setting, as the students were also from the different districts of Sargodha (Pakistan), connected through a digital platform on a single site. Details about environmental setting of zoom extramural class is already explained in the introductory part from the perspective of LLBC.

The four central aspects of digital space given by Lee & Roger (2023) were also central to this zoom digital space. Integrated geography, global networking where learners were interacting without any physical proximity but with intrinsic and self-directed attitude made it easier to share learning materials through screen space, making it a multimodal digital ecology of learning. Still, the physical presence of teacher, movement, gesture and gaze are important classroom affordances which were missing in class due to constraint of video conferencing.

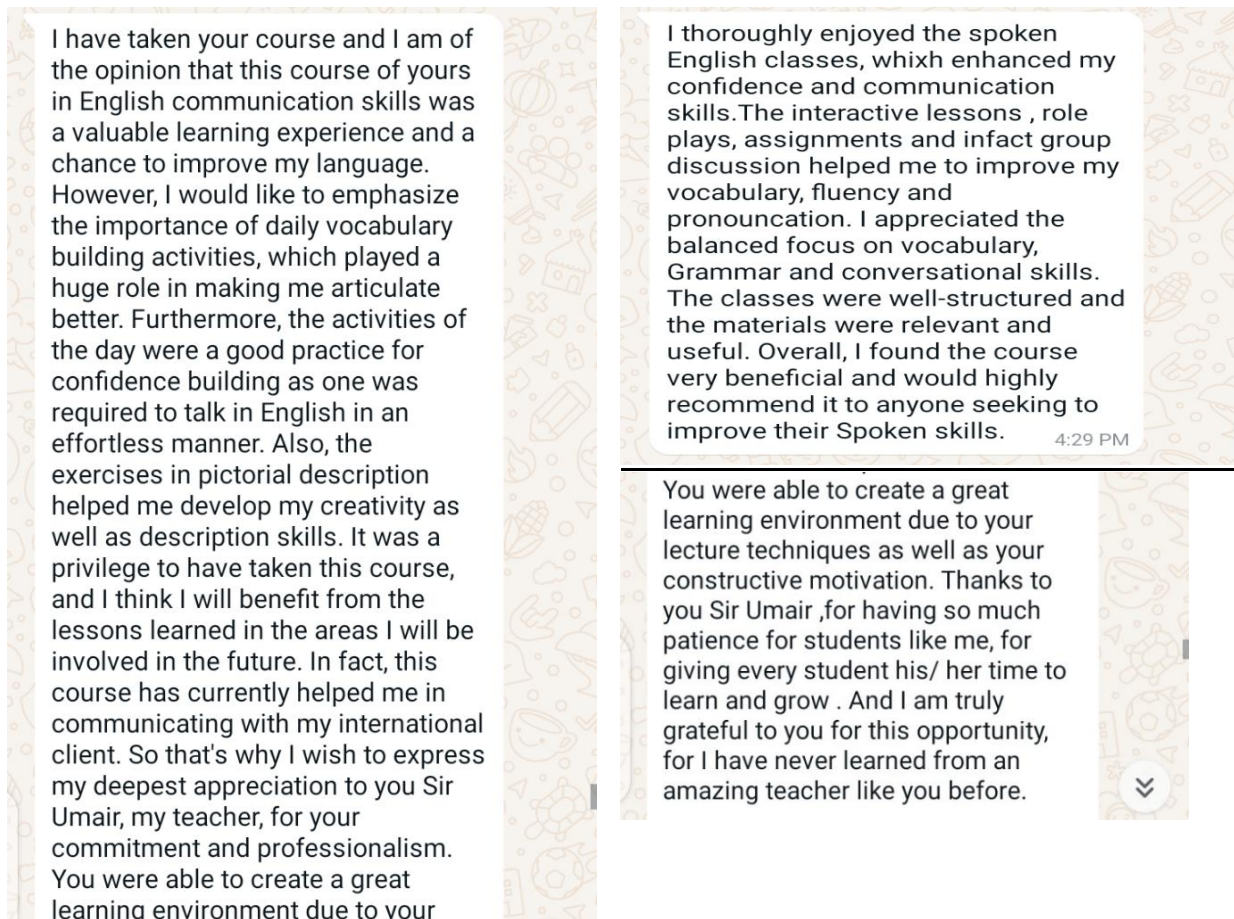


Figure.4. Screenshots of Feedback from Two Students

## Conclusion

Describing Pakistani zoom classroom as a digital language learning ecology, this study only highlights the digital aspects of the zoom space, elucidating the aim of study. It describes how zoom provided an online site for Pakistani SLA learners who joined 40 days online spoken course, without describing the outcomes of this course. The theory of language learning ecology is used to critically analyze Pakistani zoom classroom which describes the relationship of the learner and the environment. The key features of language learning ecology framework are context of learning, setting, interaction, affordances and naturalistic environment. An interactive online ecology where learning is informal and beyond the class, makes it extramural learning of English (Sundqvist, 2009) which is also a part of the framework of study. In addition to these features of extramural zoom language learning ecology, concept of digital space is directly associated with the online class. Therefore, a collective framework of extramural language learning ecology, including all these aspects is formulated to describe the zoom classroom space of Pakistani learners.

Digital and extramural language learning ecology framework has not only described the affordances of the Pakistani classroom but also few constraints. SLA ecology is concerned particularly with human development and learning, so Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 3) describes human development as a lasting change in the way a person deals and perceives his environment. Thereby, to describe the informal, out of the class digital environment of Pakistani learners is to describe the way how SLA learners deal with their environment.

With the technological revolutions, modes of learning beyond classroom are also improvising, making the learners adaptable and flexible for learning. A digital online ecology of learning for

extramural English holistically connects the ideas of environment, space, setting, context and affordances of the available resources and zoom is one such online learning ecology that has made distant learning easier, approachable and engrossing for Pakistani learners.

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