



Creating learning opportunities in the affordance-oriented EFL e-learning environment: a theoretical framework and strategies

Jiang Shiyong

Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, China

Abstract

In the process of EFL learning, what eventually determines the effectiveness is whether there are sufficient learning opportunities which ensure the happenings of learning. Affordance is one of the important elements in the study of ecology which indicates the complex interaction between the agent and its environment. It determines whether and how the learner can perceive the ecological environment and make use of the resources. Currently, the study of foreign language e-learning has become a hot topic in the field of educational linguistics. However, less research has noticed the feature of affordance of EFL e-learning environment as a complex ecosystem. This paper, based on the study of ecology, aims to probe into the nature of affordance of EFL e-learning, so as to highlight how foreign language teaching and learning should be carried out efficiently in the new environment of learning.

Keywords: EFL learning, eco-system, affordance, e-learning environment, strategies

1. Introduction

How to learn a foreign language (FL) effectively has always been a controversial topic in the world, and many researchers and practitioners have been working to find effective methods and techniques. However, as discussed by some scholars (Lashen-Freeman, 2008) [14], FL learning is per se a very complex system which requires resources of many types and efforts and cooperation between many parties such as the learner, the teacher and other environmental factors. In fact, as the study of ecology indicates, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) forms an ecological system which follows the rules of ecology of human world. In the unique ecosystem, the development of EFL learners as active agents requires necessary affordance as argued by Gibson (2015) [8]. In particular, with the advancement of internet technology and computer science, EFL learning has changed gradually in learning models and methods with the aid of e-learning. An example in case is that learners can have much more freedom in choosing the way of learning and the way to access resources because of internet and the mobile devices. Learners can be organized in the newly created teaching models like MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course), SPOCs (Small Private Online Course), flipped classroom, etc. and learn with multimodality resources via smart phones, tablet, computers, pads, or in the "cloud" environment. However, no matter what learning models the teacher many choose, one crucial element must be considered is whether learning opportunities are created and learning really happens. It is true that internet technology brings more possibilities of language learning which bridge the gap of time and space and provides more chances of learning. However, EFL learning opportunity is influenced by many ecological factors although e-learning environment can provide richer possibilities than before. For example, learners may be distracted by the cartoons, they can not control themselves, they may feel lonely, etc. If the platforms and

devise can not be used appropriately, students can only stop at a superficial stage of learning, hindering students from critical thinking and innovation (Xu, 2012) [19]. Therefore, as Gibson argued (2015) [8], it is essential that in the complex ecological environment of EFL e-learning, affordance of the system must be ensured in order that learners can really get the opportunities they need. It is based on such consideration that this paper, based on the theories of ecology and complex theory, aims to probe into the nature of the complex EFL e-learning ecosystem and to find effective models of learning in the framework of affordance of EFL learning in an E-learning era with Chinese EFL learners as examples.

2. Related studies of learning opportunities

Although learning opportunity is an essential component of EFL learning, it has not yet gained much attention in reality. In the literature, the study of learning opportunity is mainly attached to the study of second language acquisition. For example, cognitive perspective of SLA mainly focuses on how learners process second language information to ensure learning opportunities, including elements of noticing, intake, memory (Gass & Selinker, 2000) [6]. For Socio-cultural perspective of SLA, it is interactions that bring opportunities to learn. Van Lier (2000) [18] once held that learning happens not for the amount of input but the opportunities of interaction. In addition, the focus of conversational analysis (CA) focused on how participants obtain and process learning opportunities in the conversation (Kasper, 2004) [11]. Kumaravadivelu (1994; 2003) [12] addressed teaching as the activity to create learning opportunities which will be utilized to make learning happen by analyzing the nature of learning opportunities. In the study of second language learning, Crabbe (2003; 2007) [4, 5] regarded learning opportunity as an independent filed with a unique framework, arguing that L2 learning should not be restricted only in L2 production but

more on learning opportunities. This idea was supported by Allwright (2005) ^[1] in the process of criticizing traditional teaching model as “teaching knowledge point by point”. One point needs mentioning is that Anderson (2015) ^[2] addressed learning opportunities based on affordance of the classroom; however, he mainly concerned problems of teaching planning in terms of classroom affordance. With regard to EFL learning practice at present, although e-learning models like MOOCs, blended learning, microclass and mobile learning are prosperous worldwide, so far, there is no systematic study concentrating on how learning opportunities can be created in the e-learning environment, such as how language learners respond to the multimodality, how learners obtain learning opportunities with the affordance in the blended classroom or virtual community, etc. In addition, the fact is that learners cannot make full use of those facilities, especially when there is no overall consideration of learning design and its corresponding implementation. Teachers cannot have a complete understanding of their students and, students might waste their precious time surfing in the irrelevant website. What’s worse is that learners may get incorrect resources from the internet, for example, they may get the wrong knowledge from others through the internet. This makes the systematic study of the creation of EFL learning opportunities in an E-learning environment a must.

3. The theoretical framework of learning opportunity creation in the e-learning environment

EFL learning in China has developed very quickly, especially after the 21st century. Following the development and application of more and more advanced technology, the price of mobile devices, portable devices and internet access are all lowered down, which paved the way for the innovation of learning both at school and at home. In such a background, e-learning has gradually developed into a trend in basic and higher education. Currently, even in some west rural areas, many people can afford to use smart phone with internet access. Not long ago, the Chinese government declared to cut the price of telecommunication to 30% per cent, which makes the popularity and development of e-learning more and more convenient with high expectation. Therefore, creating effective teaching and learning models with more and more effective devices and platforms, apps becomes urgent. However, although learning English with PCs, tablets and mobile phones and other devices for decade, there are not many scholars delved into nature of how learning can really happen or how learning opportunities can be created. In this part, a theoretical framework of creating learning opportunities is provided in the following from the ecological perspective.

3.1 Affordance-oriented EFL learning

Affordance is an important notion in ecopsychology which is closely linked to learning opportunities. The famous ecopsychological scholar Gibson (1986) ^[7] first proposed the idea of affordance by suggesting that affordance is the action possibility formed by the relationship between a human agent and the environment that defines how the human agent may act and behave through his perception and interaction with the environment. This means that human actions such as

participating in EFL learning are dependent on the agent’s perception of the affordance in the environment. The perception, according to Norman (1999) ^[16], is based on human experience gained from the environment. What is the nature of affordance? Simply, it is what the environment can afford to the animals. For example, the handles on a tea set provide an obvious affordance for holding. Gibson (2015) ^[8] argued that animals and the environment form an inseparable unit and that the environment of any animal contains substances, surfaces and their layout, enclosures, objects, places, events, and other animals which may be affordance for some animals. Likewise, if a ground has the quality of being flat, leveled, extended and hard, it can provide “affordance” to the animal when it is perceived as possible. Briefly, affordance is something that the environment can provide to the agent which can be perceived by the agent. Like in the aforementioned example of tea set, it can be affordance only when it is perceived by the person who regards it as “a flat instrument to hold”, otherwise, it is meaningless. Therefore, the perception by the agents determines the actual affordance of the environment.

However, affordance might be positive or negative depending on its own characteristics and how the agent many recognize it (Gibson, 2015) ^[8]. For instance, the mobile phone in an English class can be used as an e-dictionary or a game player, and its affordance can be both positive and negative in classroom learning accordingly, depending on how the students see its function. Therefore, affordance requires that not only the environment can provide something, but that the agent can actively behaves in the environment to perceive it and makes use of it. This is significant for ELT as L2 learning is a complex and dynamic ecological system (Larsen-freeman & Cameron, 2008). The real classroom is in reality a complex ecosystem in which the factors like L2 teachers, students, resources and their complex relationships, etc. directly have an impact on the generation of learning opportunities in a number of ways.

In an EFL classroom, the terminal aim is to let students have more opportunities in order to master the language in question. In doing so, what counts is whether there is enough affordance for learners which pave the way for the generation of learning opportunities. As argued by Gibson and his followers, learning a foreign language no doubt forms a unique human ecosystem, including all those parties involved and their complex interrelationships, like students, teachers, course designers, material developers, resources providers, etc. Of course, among all those elements, only those of close or direct relationships would have apparent impact upon learning. Generally, those elements of EFL learning, such as the EFL teacher, students, learning environment, and so forth have an intricate interrelationship in the process of teaching and learning English.

It is through such a dynamic interaction among those ecological components that affordance of EFL learning is brought about which ensures learning opportunities. For example, in a middle school English class, the teacher can provide five to ten different sentences containing the similar structure of “there be” as learning materials in learning the structure in question. It would be more effective for students to get the structure than merely teach the structure directly by

the teacher as there is affordance of experiencing such structure. If the teacher can also provide some objects like apple, book, pen, and so on in learning the structure, there would be even more affordance of perceiving “there be”, and certainly in such a case students would have more effective learning opportunities; therefore, the teaching we are discussing is affordance-directed.

3.2 EFL e-learning ecosystem and its affordance

Ecosystem refers to the united whole of all the animals or their groups and the interaction between animals and their environment in some certain places of the natural habituation (Zhang, 2011) [20]. According to Zhang (2011) [20], there are complex interrelationships between animals, between animals and the environment. For the recent decades, following the development of internet as well as mobile technology, there is growing interest in using digital multimodal devices as an integral part of ELT pedagogy (Jiang, 2017) [10]. E-learning has now become a tendency in schools at various levels in China. Such an environment would undoubtedly provide more opportunities for EFL learners as it would provide more possibilities. However, in order to make sure that e-learning is effective, according to Levy (2006) [15], technology, teachers, courses, learners all play their roles in the effectiveness of e-learning; besides, learners find e-learning system characteristics related to technology also related to characteristics on course and professor when learning online. That is, EFL e-learning actually forms a complex ecosystem characterized by its learning facilities and the new concepts of learning in the new environment.

The success of EFL learning exists in the affordance that the environment can provide to students. However, it must be made clear that e-learning environment is not a natural environment like a forest. It is formed with the efforts of many humans. It needs facilities, devices and various apps invented and manipulated by different people; it also needs teachers' and students' cooperation and interaction in various activities with multiple relationships. For instance, if students are supposed to learn how to make appointment, they must have such classes with the necessary learning materials, including experiencing some trial production of appointment with the interaction with the teacher and peers. In addition, if they could get more listening or speaking materials through e-learning channels, it will be more helpful in the long run; therefore, smart phones or tablet computers will help a lot. However, all those learning facilities as well as learning and teaching activities must be manipulated based on the affordance they need. Nowadays, although there are more and more novice facilities and apps in e-learning, it does not mean that students can really learn more effectively. For instance, some EFL teachers would like to have primary school students learn more by using the apps of English learning through smart phones. They would let students finish some items of multiple choices through certain app on the phone; however, some students just finish it quickly without thinking about what it is for. They do it just like it is something as “finishing a task as required because for many of the students, what are regarded as “formal homework” is of those written work. That's to say, students will not perceive those possibilities of learning, and certainly there would not be more learning

opportunities. In fact, even the teacher who assigns the homework has not such consideration of affordance of learning environment. In that case, e-learning undoubtedly will not play its role as expected. To learn English well, e-learning must be treated as an ecosystem with its own characteristics and restrictions to ensure more affordance which direct language experiencing and processing internally.

3.3 The specific framework of EFL learning opportunity in the affordance-oriented environment

As Anderson (2015) [2] holds, learning opportunity is the explicit or implicit development of the cognition that appears in the classroom or as the result of teaching; it is per se dynamic and is restricted by the ecological environment of the classroom. From the perspective of affordance, EFL learning opportunities are those accesses or any advantageous conditions of experiencing and processing English language. Following the development of e-learning technology and practice, EFL learning opportunities emerge in a non-linear and dynamic affordable e-learning environment. In other words, teaching activities with advanced learning instrument like internet, computers, and smart phones do not mean the generation of learning absolutely. It is the fact that students are directed to obtain the positive affordance in e-learning activities that determines the learning. For instance, in a blended college English in which both on-line database and in-class interaction must be integrated, the teacher must first have a complete and effective whole design of the on-line learning before having the class. Only when students are mobilized to learn in the mature way of through on-line resource can they have more affordance in classroom interaction which then, determines the possibilities of learning opportunities. In doing so, both the teacher and students must have appropriate assessment of the current situation in order to create the real learning opportunities. On the basis of Crabbe (2003; 2007) [4,5] and Anderson (2015) [2], it is safe to believe that the creation of learning opportunities in L2 classroom at least incorporates the following three dimensions:

- Beliefs of English learning (including how and what to learn)
- Learning activities which provide opportunities (the carrier of learning opportunities)
- Affordance in the e-learning environment (perceptions, interactions between the agent and the environmental factors)

First of all, there must be appropriate understanding and beliefs of English learning, especially learning under the condition of MOOCs or SPOCs, etc. Both the teacher and students should have the right beliefs of what to learn and how to learn in an e-learning environment. Secondly, there must be certain suitable learning activities facilitated by both e-learning and other patterns as the carrier of learning opportunities. Thirdly, for the creation of learning opportunities, all the physical, cognitive, affective, psychological, cultural affordance should be integrated in the process of e-learning to provide affordance; besides, the affordance should be positive to ensure positive behavior of learning. In the affordance-oriented EFL learning framework, the teacher is responsible to construct an environment

containing effective interaction, which is able to provide sufficient learning opportunities, rather than be restricted by e-learning tools. Students must be mobilized to see and to use e-learning tools effectively as e-learning is, after all, an instrument and learning with on-line course or with some useful apps must be in accordance with the requirement of

EFL learning characteristics as an ecological system. In such a situation, the teacher and students should cooperate and become co-adaptive with each other in order to deal with the complex interrelationships of the system. Such a framework can be illustrated by the following figure:

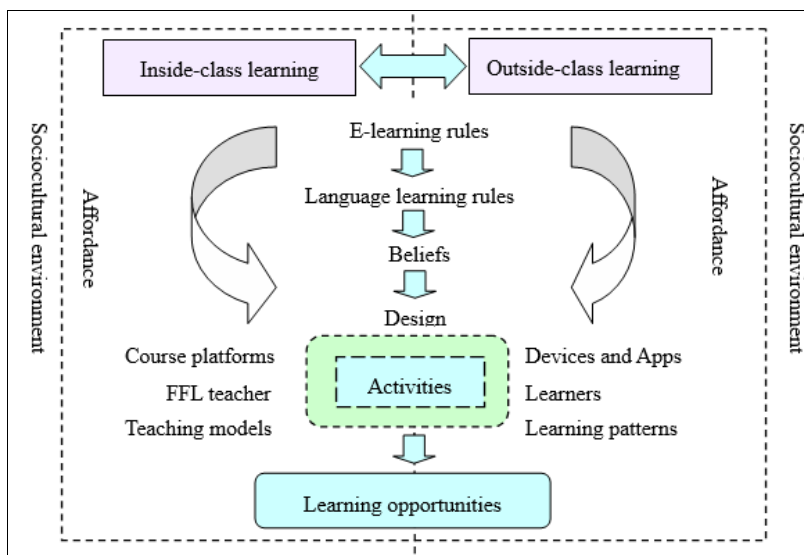


Fig 1: The ecological framework of EFL e-learning

As shown in Figure 1, the dotted line pane indicates the EFL e-learning ecosystem which incorporates both the space of school and other places, and the full line pane shows the macro sociocultural environment that the EFL e-learning ecosystem is in. In the framework of EFL e-learning, technological, educational, and social affordances of the environment constitute a complex taxonomy that elucidates potentials for EFL learning as argued by Jiang (2017) [10]. In order to have more learning opportunities, it is necessary to have a smooth ecological relationship among all those possible factors. Both the inside-class and outside-class learning are supposed to integrate organically. In so doing, there must be adaptive beliefs about learning English with on line courses or other resources with smart phone apps in appropriate time and with appropriate patterns. Then, from beliefs to the design of learning, and together with course platforms, different devices and apps as well as the teacher and students as agents, a unique ecosystem is formed, of which the creation of learning opportunities in certain learning activities is regarded as the standard of learning efficacy. Obviously, learning English in such an environment becomes even more subtle and complicated than in the traditional pattern and should be monitored by the teacher to ensure affordance (Towndrow, 2016) [17]. The key point of the framework is that there must be sufficient affordance through interactions and manipulation of the complicated ecological relationship in each phase of learning both inside and outside the classroom. In so doing, there must be suitable learning and teaching patterns and appropriate use of e-learning devices as each step and each activity should be in line with the rules of EFL learning and e-learning. For example, in a blended class, both the pre-class learning and in-class discussion must be

designed organically. The pre-class tasks should have the characteristics of being easily finished and are insightful for future learning. This will lead to the demand of in-class discussion and thus make the pre-class and in-class stages integrated harmoniously.

4. Strategies of creating learning opportunities in the affordance-oriented EFL e-learning environment

No matter e-learning or traditional learning environment, the key to success lies in whether there are sufficient learning opportunities and that learners can really perceive opportunities as affordance in any situation and at any time. Therefore, an effective EFL teacher should have a clear understanding of the affordance of the learning environment. The following are some of the strategies that are proved to be effective in the practice.

4.1 Balancing the use of e-learning activities

In the e-learning epoch, if learning can be integrated in the multiple patterns of various e-learning devices and platforms, it would be more effective and helpful for students. However, it must be pointed out that learning English in such an environment must be cautious enough to avoid students' indulgence in on line activities. After all, the most important issue is to have more learning opportunities. At present, in China, there are many ways to learn English on line, such as learning with non-profit resources (like MOOCs from some open universities or the likewise), learning with some charged resources (on line courses from private companies like net Ease, Xinlang and Tencent), learning with some local (public or private) resources on We Chat, QQ platform, Neta Ease open class, etc. It seems that students have more choices of

obtaining resources and it's true that students could have easy access to some precious course resources. However, in such a learning environment, there is the danger that students spend too much time surfing on the internet which will then influence the learning as a whole ecosystem, especially when students are too young. Learning actually consists of a series of events or actions which will then become affordance of the environment (Gibson & Pick, 2000) ^[9].

In fact, most of the work has to be aided or even finished by the parents at home. What's worse, teachers should not force students to learn and to send the "achievement" to the QQ group everyday since it could be a burden for both students and their parents, causing pressure and complaint; certainly, there would be little affordance of learning. Another point is that learning on line is different from learning in the classroom. It might easy for one to go back to the knowledge and have a stable memory of the facts when he or she learns in the traditional way. After all, learning with a small device like a phone would also limit students' cognitive perception and emotion of learning. Therefore, to have more learning opportunities, the teacher should understand the nature and the feature of those learning patterns like flipped classroom, MOOCs of English and try to balance the use of e-learning models together with English learners. If there is increase of knowledge or abilities by e-learning of English, otherwise, they should adjust the present learning pattern immediately.

4.2 Obtaining more affordance-oriented input from the on line learning activities

Input is the key element of foreign language teaching and learning which ensures that certain structures taken in and assimilated by the learner. In many cases, learning opportunities exist in various inputs, like listening and reading which contains words, structures and meaning expression. If e-learning model of input can have rich affordance for students to perceive the language points or communication, it would be helpful in acquisition. Traditionally, students get input either from the book or from the real person in EFL learning environment. In fact, in most of the cases, what they could get is mainly from the book and rarely do they have the change to communicate with native speakers. So, input is, in many cases, partial. Currently, following the development of internet and various apps as well as the development of information technology, there are a sea of resources of various types, such as listening materials directly from BBC, VOA, CNN and many other types. To have more learning opportunities through input, that is, experiencing and process data of words, phrases, structures and expressions for the assimilation, there must be the supportive ecological factors leading to affordance of input. For example, if the task is to let students "read and learn how to write a newspaper report", the teacher should give clear directions of some details with encouragement and arrangement of students' peer interaction outside class as well as in-class activities. Put it simply, students should have a clear idea of the "lead", the "body" and the structure of how the news is constructed after reading, otherwise, the learning is not affordance-directed. Besides, the teacher should understand the structure of the news text in question cautiously in advance in order to have effective interaction with students when necessary. It is only through

such a complete consideration of all the possible influential factors that students can obtain learning opportunities with rich affordance.

4.3 Ensuring learning really happens in the e-learning environment

In order to have more learning opportunities in the e-learning environment, students should try to catch any opportunity to engage in the tasks of using the target language. No matter at home or in the classroom, it must be made certain that learning really happens in the e-learning environment. In other words, the teacher and students should both be responsible for their roles. When students learn at home or after class, they must make sure that the learning is within certain scientific framework or with effective learning pattern. Currently, some researchers found that learning on line might distract learners' concentration on the real knowledge. There are in fact many distracters in the e-learning environment which must be dealt with cautiously. To have more affordance of English learning, the teacher is supposed to take more responsibilities to design and organize students' learning with some effective ways in the e-learning environment. For example, in the middle school English class, usually, there is PPT learning and on-line learning with rich resources, nevertheless, some teachers like to make some cartoons or gif pattern pictures. They are capable to attract students in the class, but they are also able to distract students from learning the language. Therefore, in order that learning may happen, the teacher should make an adaptive and intelligent design which not only attracts students but also maintain them focusing on the language. Besides, in the classroom teaching, although students have more opportunities to experience English through pictures, music, drama, cartoons, there must be appropriate communication and interaction in the classroom as learning in fact happens in the interaction and mediation as argued by scholars of sociocultural theory (Lant of, 2006) ^[13].

4.4 Maintaining high quality standard of choosing or making learning materials

In addition to learning activities, communication and interaction in e-learning environment, another important point is that learning opportunities can be created in the effective learning materials. Learning materials in the internet epoch now are richer than at any other time in the before. It's easy for students and teachers to find out learning materials of various types on the internet; however, this does not mean that learning will become so easy and convenient. As a matter of fact, anyone can produce materials of learning and upload them on the net, which makes the making of learning materials becomes no standard and thus makes learning somewhat confusing or even misleading for both teachers and students. In order to have effective learning opportunities, it is essential to maintain high quality of learning resources. Especially, within an ecological framework, it is necessary to create or choose learning materials in accordance with the ecological principles of English e-learning. With such understanding, EFL teachers should help students to differentiate what are effective and suitable materials and what are not regarding the very task as they are too much learning platforms, apps and material (Chen, 2016). It's no

good to learn something here and something there without the systematic consideration of learning.

Human learning is a process in which the information is transmitted to the brain through the channels of the eyes, ears, noses and other organs of the body through analysis, synthesizing. However, as scholars noted, learning only through one channel is restricted and limited. To learn more efficiently, verified channels are beneficial. In the e-learning ecosystem, students' attention, focus, capability to deal with information and their adaptability to the mobile devices and learning resources of multimodality, etc. will all have intermingled influences among each other. For instance, in making or choosing good English learning materials on a course platform, the teacher or the technicians should try to combine the pictures, cartoons, audio materials in a scientific framework which can adapt to students' emotional, psychological and cognitive development in the learning framework. In the e-learning platform, no matter the major learning is for certain focused content or parallel contents of listening, reading or writing, the design should be user-friendly with sufficient interaction, not just between the machine and students, but also among students themselves and teachers which can help to make full use of students' internal drive and the affordance in the environment and lead to learning opportunities.

5. Conclusion

EFL learning is a complex and dynamic ecosystem which incorporates many factors, in which the generation of learning opportunities plays the key role. Following the course of mobile and internet technology, EFL learning has undoubtedly stepped into a new epoch which makes the learning changes dramatically. As can be found across the world, learning patterns, learning models, learning resources all have changed due to the influence of e-learning. However, in some cases, it is found that learning on line or the aid of learning through internet by mobile phones, tablets or computers did not bring learning opportunities as expected. The generation of learning opportunity is affected by many factors from different aspects, especially with the emergence of new equipments and devices. To have more learning opportunities, as indicated in the studies in ecology, there should be sufficient affordance, covering rich input and output, harmonious learning atmosphere, as well as learning and teaching models in the unique e-learning environment. To conclude, In an e-learning environment, in order to obtain more learning opportunities, no matter what learning device is, or what learning resource it may be, both the teacher and learners should have a clear understanding of the nature of e-learning and hold a balanced idea of teaching and learning to cope with all those ecological components appropriately in line with the rules of foreign language learning.

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