

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**CREATING A CONDUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
IN VIETNAM****DUONG CAM TU***

ABSTRACT: This paper presents the importance of creating a conducive learning environment, and it especially focuses on creating a brain - friendly learning environment. The author analyzes some primary factors influencing the learning environment through a range of macro- level factors such as learning conditions, application of IT in teaching, and teachers' qualities. In addition, by qualitative methods, mainly through literature review combined with case study, the author states the reality of the learning environment in Vietnam through Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT), a typical example. Meanwhile, the author makes some proposals to help creating a more conducive learning environment in general and English learning environment in particular in Vietnam.

KEY WORDS: Conducive Learning Environment; Brain-Friendly Learning Environment; Learning Conditions; Application of IT in teaching; Teachers' qualities.

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1. Introduction

Researchers in education have pointed out that different learners have different types of learning. Kolb's (1984) revealed that learners collect information and perceive knowledge from stimuli and the senses that they choose to use like feeling, watching, thinking, or doing. Ken (2006) showed that some students love learning because they love their teachers' behavior and the friendliness of their classmates; others prefer watching videos while learning to store information in their long term memory. Some of them want to think and discover how to solve problems by themselves, whereas others prefer doing experiments to discover the nature of things. Additionally, students have different strategies of learning: Some want to learn by being given the meaning of things at once, whereas some try to learn by doing again and again to remember. Some students can understand and remember what they have learned easily and quickly (Erden & Altun, 2006). Conversely, some have difficulty remembering and organizing what they know. Furthermore, students have different ways of obtaining and processing information: some are interested in data and operations, some prefer theories and mathematical models, but for some others, written and verbal explanations are more effective. Some students enjoy learning in groups, while others prefer working individually. While some learners focus on interactive environments, others like working alone. Some prefer visual elements like drawings, shapes, and graphics, others pay attention to abstract concepts, etc. All of these differences in learning preferences are signs of their different learning styles, which mainly depend on individuals' brain (Felder, 1996).

Researchers in education believe that in order to optimize the individuals' learning process, it is necessary to create a brain-friendly learning environment or a conducive learning environment, in which learning conditions, technology, and teachers' qualities play key roles.

Vietnam is a country where English is taught as a foreign language from primary school. Unfortunately, after a dozen years of learning English, Vietnamese students' English proficiency is still weak, especially communication skills. Many teachers assume that the learning environment in Vietnam is not really conducive.

The question is how to optimize the learning process? Specifically, how to create a really conducive learning environment in general and in English learning in particular in Vietnam? As an educator and a teacher who has been teaching university students in Vietnam for nearly 20 years, the author of this article implemented the research with the desire to help creating a more conducive learning environment in Vietnam, in which the education setting at HUBT was taken as a case study.

In this study, the author used qualitative research which combined literature review with teaching
* Dr; Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT); Email: duongcamtu_dca@yahoo.com

experience, and through her class observation to answer the three following research questions:

Question 1. What is a conducive learning environment?

Question 2. How does the learning environment affect learners?

Question 3. What should be done to create a more conducive learning environment in English learning in Vietnam?

2. Theoretical background of the study

2.1. Learning environment

According to Movchan (2018), a learning environment is broadly defined as the place where learners engage and interact to learn new knowledge and skills. It is not limited to a place called “classroom” which is fully arranged with desks, chairs and a blackboard. As for him, developing an engaging, emotional, positive and supportive learning environment for learners is one of the most creative aspects of teaching. Typically, the learning environment is the combination of human beings and the physical environment. In other words, it focuses on the physical learning environments such as lecture halls, classrooms, or on different technologies that are used to develop online learning environments. The learning environment also consists of Learners’ characteristics, Learning and teaching goals, Activities that support learning, Assessment strategies that drive and measure learning, etc. Also, he pointed out the social, physical, and psychological factors typically involved in a learning environment have strong effects on the learners’ learning capabilities. The learning environment should be conducive for learners.

2.2. Conducive learning environment

To gain new knowledge or skills and help learners maintain their learning interests, it is necessary to create a conducive learning environment. Specifically, learners need some psychological factors for security, love, competence, personal power, novelty, freedom, fun, etc. It is, therefore, important to meet their needs at all times, and learners should be taught with a positive attitude to help them make progress. In addition, the learning environment needs support from technologies such as a Learning Management System (LMS) or communication module. Creating a stimulating environment in the classroom is of utmost importance as it enhances learners’ motivation, which optimizes the learning process (Piaget, 1951). He claimed that learners develop an understanding of themselves through their interactions with events and materials outside themselves. As for him, environment in classroom covers not only layout, furniture and decoration but also the emotional climate. When feeling comfortable, learners feel stimulated and they enjoy learning, therefore, their behavior can improve. Creating a stimulating learning environment requires the perception and qualities of teachers.

2.3. Perception and qualities of teachers

A classroom is clearly defined as Student-centered where learners can discover different kinds of learning. The move between personal and social endeavors may be the most conducive to emotionally responsive practice when it coexists with a well-thought-out routine and an attached teacher (Skinner, 2006). Teachers should have active and empathetic listening towards students as it is a powerful tool (Francis, 2005). Also, Singh (2014) affirmed that teachers play a crucial role in controlling every class activity, and the teachers’ behavior is considered the most effective stimulant as the students get inspired from the teachers who are polite, friendly, caring, kind, patient, frank, cooperative and sensitive. He supposed that apart from good nature, a teacher needs to be qualified to create an effective learning environment. A good teacher can play an important role in the individuals’ learning. He can observe and try to understand each of his student’s abilities, interests and needs. Additionally, he can stimulate and encourage his students to explore them further, and help to provide more experiences of nature, and guide them to get experiences to meet their needs in satisfying and pleasant ways. Singh also emphasized the quality of teaching as it is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools. Effective teaching requires teachers who are academically able to care about the well-being of learners. A good learning environment in which the teacher plays a key role can help to enhance students’ intrinsic motivation. A part from the teacher’s quality,

researchers in education believe that a good learning environment also needs good learning conditions to enhance the quality of learning.

2.4. Learning conditions

Bruffee (1999) stated that learning conditions have a great impact on students' learning effectiveness. Classrooms should be designed so that it can facilitate collaborative activities. Furniture in the classroom must be arranged in a flexible way. He described the ideal classroom for collaborative learning as a level floor, movable seats, chalkboards on three or four walls, controlled acoustics, and no central seminar. From the viewpoint of Taneja (1980), education is not the conscious process of filling but the sub-conscious process of absorption. Moreover, researchers have discovered that the classroom density has the psychological and educational effects on students, both the size of the room and the number of students. The higher the social density is the lower the students' achievement will be. They suggested that spatial density should be arranged so that both students and instructors have enough room to move easily from group to group as the crowding in educational settings may relate to personal space violation. In addition to the space in classroom, other factors such as layout, furniture, decoration, etc., should be focused on as they are the extrinsic factors affecting learning, and emotional climate increases the quality of learners' learning. Caine and Caine (1997) conclude that optimizing the use of the human brain means using the brain's infinite capacity to make connections and understanding what conditions can maximize this process. They identify three interactive and mutually supportive elements that should be present for complex learning to occur: relaxed alertness, orchestrated immersion, and active processing. An optimal state of mind that we call relaxed alertness consists of low threat and high challenge, the orchestrated immersion of the learner in multiple, complex, authentic experience, and the regular, active processing of experience as the basis for making meaning. Also, technology is considered the indispensable tool which contributes to creating a good learning environment.

2.5. Technology

Gagne (1985) suggested that technology such as the network, computers, hardware and software should be used for management and learning. The use of instructional software such as software for drill, tutorial, simulation, etc, is an effective way for making lesson plans, and other kinds of software require "teacher- led activities" to accomplish the learning tasks before and after using the software. Dweyr (1996) recommended approving the internet being used to help students like communicating with each other, or learning about their society is another option, and he emphasized on the need for students to cooperate in learning when developing projects in groups and making presentation via the internet.

If a friendly environment stimulates students' extrinsic motivation, creating a brain-friendly environment for learning will help students enhance intrinsic motivation. The combination of these two factors makes learners optimize learning effectiveness.

2.6. Brain- friendly learning environment

Caine and Caine (1997) consider the objective of brain-based learning is to transfer from perceiving information to meaningful learning. Acknowledging how the brain learns from experiences will help us to understand more about meaningful learning. Brain-based learning is a movement that is closely attached to education, and any education approach can benefit from it. They illustrated twelve principles for brain-based learning like: The brain is a social brain and uniquely organized, and that learning always involves both conscious and unconscious processes, attention and peripheral attention, etc. Despite the diverse brain-based learning, they did not use those principles to prescribe any single teaching method. Instead, the principles are intended to provide a framework for selecting the methodologies that will maximize learning and make teaching more effective and fulfilling. They may open doors for educators, increase teaching options, or serve as a guidepost to educators already working to implement brain-compatible teaching practices. In other words, an emotionally supportive and equitable learning environment should be established.

3. The importance of establishing an emotionally supportive and equitable learning environment

Dwyer (1996) stated that learning environment helps to promote the integration of formal and informal learning. The learning environment not only includes layout, furniture and decoration but also the emotional climate. Getting the environment right will create great effects for learners. If they feel comfortable in the environment, they will enjoy learning.

3.1. The importance of designing an appropriate learning environment with the students' learning styles

The learning style of an individual not only shows how they learn but also gives information about how to design a learning environment. Although all the students in a class are at the same age, at the same developmental phase, and offered mutual chances by the teacher, different behaviors, learning styles, and achievements in a class can be observed. He emphasized that no matter the learning environment, students' learning styles should be taken into consideration while designing the learning process. Many researchers underline the importance of identifying students' learning styles and how helpful this can be in preparing the learning/teaching environment (Boydak, 2001). In addition, space design for learning also accounts for creating a conducive learning environment. The quality of the interactions depends on the possibilities for engagement that the environment provides. Schools are places for both teachers and learners to communicate, therefore, the learning environment needs to be conducive to get effective education, which allows the learners space and time for interaction during the learning process. Creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments can be achieved through the effective classroom organization, interaction and innovation. In education institutions, if the learning environment is designed appropriately for students' learning styles, their academic achievements increase (Erden & Altun, 2006).

Learning is directly linked to stimulants available in schools, and good infrastructural facilities including technology act as stimulants as it has been proved as the utmost importance (Singh, 2014).

3.2. The importance of Technology in creating a supportive learning environment

Educational technology is most effective tool for learning when it functions as part of orchestrated system that includes effective curriculum and instruction. In addition, every brain is uniquely organized (Caine and Caine, 1997). In other words, different people have different types of learning. Thus, the chief stimulants are the computer as it can increase the capacity to stimulate complex thought process a reawakened interest in the strategies people use to solve difficult problems, a demonstration of certain reasoning and communication. By stimulating the senses, the individual learning can be enhanced, for instance: if a person prefers to learn through visual aids, "seeing" material should be used. Another one may prefer listening and thus, audio related education materials can be applied (Singh, 2014). Technology is an effective tool for supporting individuals' learning. In addition, students need access to the Internet to seek for resources that help them to discover and understand about the world, and express themselves, too. However, in order to achieve the learning effectiveness, technology planning must be approached systemically. Research shows that students' learning becomes the best when technology is fully integrated with content, sound principles of learning, and high- quality teaching. Skinner (2006) pointed out the importance of technology integration: Drill software is used to increase the correct answering frequency in order to respond to stimuli, and Exercises in these packages help students memorize important basic information.

If technology acts as effective teaching aid, the teacher plays the key role in creating an inductive learning environment.

3.3. The importance of teachers' behavior and the teachers' qualities

According to Rosenfield (1987), learning environment is one of the main factors creating learning stimuli, in which teacher's behavior is considered to be the most effective stimulant for the students' learning. There is an interrelation between the teacher's behavior and the students' subject liking. When learners feel supported, welcomed, and respected, they are more involved in their study. Emotions are proved crucial to memory because they facilitate the storage and recall of information. What they learn is influenced by emotions and mind- sets involving in expectancy, self- esteem and the need for interaction. Thus, emotion and cognition are inseparated. This means that it is imperative for teachers to maintain positive relationships with the learners while also ensuring healthy

association among the learners. Providing constructive feedback, for instance, not only informs the learners what is needed to be done, it is also a key to motivate them. More importantly, timely feedback ensures an interactive learning environment. It keeps learners involved and allows them to keep a strong feeling of purpose and belonging. Also, honoring the learners' success is another way to establish a positive and effective learning environment. When learners' achievement is recognized and shared with other learners by the teacher, it makes the learners feel proud and excited, and it therefore fosters healthy learning behavior.

Apart from the teacher's behavior, the quality of teaching is a crucial factor promoting effective learning. Teaching aids such as videos, pictures, shapes, graphics, etc., are created by teachers to support the learning process, and teachers are therefore needed to be qualified enough to fulfill their tasks successfully.

In addition to teacher's qualities, maintaining interactive and collaborative activities is another factor to create a conducive learning environment.

3.4. The importance of making use of interactive and collaborative activities

Social communication and learning as an essential ingredient to giving content to mental states, and one set of behaviors are those that produce cooperation (Davidson, 1987). Collaborative learning refers to a wide variety of educational activities in which human relationships are the key to welfare, achievement, and mastery, wherein teachers help students learn by working together on substantive issues. Establishing strong interactions and promoting collaborative learning is an effective learning environment. Fun activities make learners interested in attending the class and help them learn and progress in a friendlier environment. When the teacher creates a positive learning environment, learners have the higher motivation that leads to better and more promising learning performance and outcomes.

4. The actuality of the learning environment in Vietnam

In reality, learning environment is not really conducive for learners at almost educational institutions in Vietnam in terms of learning conditions, the application of IT in teaching, and the teachers' qualities.

4.1. Learning conditions

Learning conditions such as learning space design, teaching methodology, class size, and curriculum in educational institutions in Vietnam do not meet the requirements for a conducive learning environment. Specifically, the layout of the classroom is mainly conventionally arranged, and the teacher-centered teaching methodology is still dominant. The teacher stands on the podium, which is higher than the classroom floor, to convey knowledge, and the teaching aid is mainly a chalkboard whereas the students' desks are arranged towards the board so that they can listen to the teacher and take note of whatever they hear from their teacher in a passive way. Moreover, the class size is large, most classes have more than 30 students, even 50 students or more. Furthermore, the curriculum and tests normally do not include speaking skill, which is considered one of the most important skill in any language; the time for each session is limited, from 45 to 50 minutes; and there are normally three to four sessions per week. Apparently, with the mentioned learning conditions, organizing interactive activities such as group discussion for students is a big challenge.

4.2. The application of technology in teaching

In many schools in Vietnam, especially in the remote countryside or mountainous areas, classes are often in poor conditions with no Internet connection or no computers, which makes the lesson planning and teaching difficult. Therefore, the application of IT to create attractive lessons with lively images and sound, collaborating with other sources from the text books is a big ordeal for teachers, and the customization of students' learning seems impossible.

4.3. Teachers' qualities

Due to the limited time in-class and the curriculum focusing mainly on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension, many teachers still follow the traditional teaching method, which is teacher-centered. They try to convey knowledge with strict attitude to control their students, and force them to perceive as much knowledge as possible so that their students can pass the exam with the highest

scores without caring about the learners' feelings and individuals' learning styles. In terms of technology application in teaching, although there has been a breakthrough after the Covid 19 pandemic, making most teachers be used to E-lectures, some of them are not able to make use of external learning resources such as images, audio or video clips related to the lessons to meet the need of diverse learning styles of learners because they are not well-trained about how to apply IT in lesson planning and teaching.

5. Proposals for creating a more conducive learning environment for students in Vietnam

Educators need tools and spaces that enable collaborative planning and information sharing. In any learning environment that produces supportive and positive emotional states can be expected to facilitate learning and the development of place attachment. To create a more conducive learning environment in educational institutions in Vietnam, the author of this article makes some recommendations as follow:

5.1. *Creating an effective and brain-friendly learning environment*

Student- centered strategy should be strongly encouraged. A classroom with Student- centered where learners can explore various kinds of learning and move to socialize with others in the class settings may be the most conducive to emotionally responsive practice when it coexists with a well planned routine and an attached teacher. Researchers in education believe that every student should feel wanted, loved and cared, therefore, comfort level in the classrooms should be taken care of, and self- discipline and desire for knowledge should be included. Additionally, interactive and collaborative activities in class should be encouraged. Furthermore, curriculum and tests that assess students' abilities should include speaking skills, especially interactive ones.

5.2. *Learning conditions*

In order to effectively conduct interactive activities, the desks in the classroom need to be arranged in a reasonable, moveable and convenient way. Adequate space should be provided so that both students and teachers have enough room to move easily from group to group when they carry out discussion, negotiation or debate activities. Researchers indicated that groups of students can be expected to work together most effectively at personal distances of 2 to 4 feet. Additionally, the air conditioning system should be installed in classrooms in hot regions to avoid the heat of the summer, which makes students distract from learning because of feeling hot and tired.

5.3. *Applying technology as blended learning*

Technology plays an important role in facilitating essential learning experiences. The application of technology in teaching and learning as blended learning seems indispensable in the era of technology revolution 4.0. The internet must be connected in classrooms and computers must be equipped so that teachers can make use of the external resources to include in the related lessons. It also needs to pay attention to regularly maintaining or replacing the teaching aids such as projectors, flipcharts or microphones if they are too old.

Apart from accessing the network for different learning sources, an LMS for self-study needs to be maintained and developed so that students can consolidate and practice what they have learned in class, personalizing individuals' learning and facilitating the process of storing information in the learners' long-term memory. More importantly, they have more chance to interact with their teacher and their classmates, which helps to strengthen their relationship, creating an effective learning environment.

5.4. *Standardizing qualities of teachers*

Teachers need to be standardized. Specifically, they need to have both high EQ and IQ to create a conducive learning environment. Teachers should take care of learners and love to be with them because learners like to have the feeling of being wanted, loved and cared. Additionally, they must be knowledgeable and constantly learning. Teachers should adopt student- centered teaching approach, activity based, participatory learning experiences, projects, discussion, dialogue, observation, integrating academic. More importantly, they should be trained for key teaching and learning strategies such as Cooperative Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Group discussion, Case analysis and Self-directed learning resources. Additionally, teachers need to be well equipped with necessary

skills and knowledge about IT application so that they can utilize the creativity in lesson design, increase the vividness and attractiveness of lessons with images, sounds, and videos to increase the students' interest in learning and the interaction between them and their teacher and classmates.

5.5. Professional enhancement policies for teachers

In order to qualify the teachers, some institutional policies are strong recommended as follows:

- Holding international and national workshops or conferences for teachers to exchange and update the teaching tendency.
 - Holding regular professional seminars within the Faculty for teachers so that they have chance to learn and share their teaching experience.
 - Training teachers how to apply technology in teaching and how to adopt blended teaching and learning methodology.
 - Maintaining class observation carried out by Deans of the Faculty so that teachers can receive positive comments and feedback, or among teachers to create more chance for them to learn from one another.
 - Holding teaching contests annually so that teachers can constantly improve their teaching skills.
- Meanwhile, it is the opportunity for teachers to learn from each other's teaching experience.

6. Conclusion

Optimizing the students' learning capacity is the aim of every educator, and making students involve in class activities and want to learn is the desire of every teacher. Classroom environment plays a very important role in learning. The combination of well-equipped infrastructural facilities and qualified teachers will make the learning effective. Conducting activities, followed by discussion, interaction, collaboration greatly contributes to the success of the students' learning. In a word, creating conducive learning environments needs to focus on learners, which bases on three main characteristics: Classroom as learning communities, personal and social development, and positive classroom climate. Based on the literature review and practical research on the learning environment in Vietnam, in which HUBT is a case study, the author of this article expects that her suggestions to overcome limitations in learning environment be considered by educators. Hopefully, a more conducive learning environment for learners in general and English language learning in particular will soon take place in Vietnam.

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Tạo dựng môi trường học tập hiệu quả tại Việt Nam

Tóm tắt: Bài viết trình bày tầm quan trọng của việc tạo dựng môi trường học tập hiệu quả, và nó đặc biệt tập trung vào việc tạo ra một môi trường học tập thân thiện với não bộ. Tác giả phân tích một số yếu tố cơ bản ảnh hưởng đến môi trường học tập thông qua một loạt các yếu tố mang tính vĩ mô như điều kiện học tập, ứng dụng CNTT trong giảng dạy và phẩm chất của giáo viên. Bên cạnh đó, tác giả nêu thực trạng môi trường học tập ở Việt Nam. Bằng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính, chủ yếu thông qua nghiên cứu tài liệu kết hợp với phương pháp điền cứu, lấy Trường Đại học Kinh doanh và Công nghệ Hà Nội (HUBT) làm ví dụ điển hình về môi trường học tập ở Việt Nam, tác giả nêu thực trạng, đồng thời đưa ra một số đề xuất nhằm giúp tạo ra một môi trường học tập hiệu quả hơn nói chung và việc học tiếng Anh nói riêng tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Môi trường học tập hiệu quả; môi trường học tập thân thiện với não bộ; điều kiện học tập; ứng dụng công nghệ trong dạy học; phẩm chất của giáo viên.