
Design thinking in Education: Empowering students in ELT class

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the integration of Design Thinking into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms as a means to empower students. Design Thinking, a dynamic problem-solving framework, offers a student-centred approach to education that places learners at the forefront. This article further investigates the ideation phase, where creativity in language use is encouraged through technology integration and interactive activities. These practices align with 21st-century skill development, promoting creativity, critical thinking, and effective communication. Prototyping, another crucial Design Thinking stage, finds application in project-based learning activities that tangibly reinforce language skills while offering real-world context. The author explores the theories of testing phase that empowers students to apply language competence beyond the classroom, emphasizes the practical value of language acquisition. By examining the confluence of Design Thinking principles with ELT, this article discusses the potential to prepare students as not only proficient communicators but also as adaptable thinkers ready to navigate our interconnected world. Design Thinking, therefore, emerges as a powerful tool for transforming ELT classrooms into hubs of innovation and student empowerment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) is no longer a static process focused solely on grammar and vocabulary acquisition. In an age of rapid globalization and digital interconnectedness, students need to be equipped with not only language skills but also the ability to think critically, problem-solve, and adapt to evolving communication landscapes. Enter Design Thinking, a methodology originally rooted in product design but increasingly recognized for its potential to transform education. In this article, the author investigates the concept of Design Thinking in ELT, and explore how it can empower students to become more effective communicators and innovative thinkers.

1.1 Understanding Design Thinking in Education

Design Thinking, as it applies to education, is a dynamic problem-solving framework that places the learner at the center. It encourages students to empathize with users (in this case, language learners), define problems, ideate creative solutions, prototype their ideas, and test them in real-world contexts. Several influential authors have explored the integration of Design Thinking in education, shedding light on its effectiveness in empowering students in ELT classes.

Several studies have explored the integration of Design Thinking in English Language Teaching (ELT) with a focus on empowering students. For instance, a study conducted by Johnson and Millard (2019) examined the impact of Design Thinking principles in an ELT classroom. They found that by incorporating empathy and active problem-solving, students not only improved their language skills but also exhibited enhanced self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to communicate in English. The study demonstrated that Design Thinking fosters a more student-centred learning environment, where learners actively engage with language challenges and collaboratively work towards solutions.

Furthermore, a study by Smith and Brown (2020) delved into the ideation phase of Design Thinking in ELT. They explored how encouraging creative language use through multimedia projects and collaborative storytelling enhanced language acquisition and student motivation. Their findings suggested that when students are given the freedom to explore language creatively, they become more active participants in the learning process and develop a deeper connection to the language. This study highlighted the transformative potential of Design Thinking in ELT, particularly in nurturing creativity and critical thinking skills while improving language proficiency. Together, these studies underscore the effectiveness of Design Thinking in empowering students in ELT classes by creating more engaging and innovative learning experiences.

1.2 Understanding Language Learners

In the context of ELT, empathy is a foundational concept within Design Thinking. To understand the learner, educators must adopt the perspective of their students, recognizing their unique motivations, challenges, and cultural backgrounds.

Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of "communities of practice," which highlights the importance of social and cultural contexts in learning. Applying this concept to ELT, educators can see their classrooms as communities of English language practice. In these communities, learners from diverse backgrounds come together, each with their own goals and experiences. By empathizing with the individual experiences and aspirations of students, educators can tailor their teaching methods to better suit the needs of each learner.

1.3 Defining Language Learning Challenges

Once educators have established an empathetic connection with their students, the next step is to define the language learning challenges. Authors like Hattie and Timperley (2007) in their work on feedback have emphasized the importance of clear, specific goals in the learning process. This principle aligns with the 'Define' stage of Design Thinking, where learners work collaboratively with educators to articulate their specific language learning challenges.

By defining these challenges, students gain a clearer understanding of what they need to achieve and educators can adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. For example, if students express difficulties in pronunciation, educators can focus on exercises and activities that specifically address this challenge.

1.4 Fostering Creative Language Use

Ideation is a critical phase of Design Thinking that encourages creative thinking and problem-solving. In ELT, this phase can be interpreted as fostering creative language use. Researchers like Teresa Mackinnon (2017) have explored the integration of technology and creativity in language education. The integration of technology, such as multimedia presentations or collaborative online platforms, provides students with the opportunity to creatively engage with language.

Furthermore, encouraging students to participate in language games, collaborative storytelling, or debates promotes active language use. These activities not only enhance language proficiency but also cultivate creativity, critical thinking, and effective communication, which are essential skills for 21st-century learners (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

1.5 Prototyping and Language Learning in Action

Prototyping in Design Thinking involves creating tangible representations of solutions. In the context of ELT, this translates into project-based language learning activities. Researchers like Paulus and Horstman (2019) have discussed the benefits of project-based learning in language education. These projects may involve creating multimedia presentations, writing blogs, or scripting and performing skits in English.

Such hands-on activities not only reinforce language skills but also provide students with real-world applications of their language proficiency. This demonstrates the practical value of language learning and reinforces the idea that language is a tool for communication and problem-solving in various contexts.

1.6 Testing and Applying Language Competence

The Testing phase in Design Thinking encourages students to apply their language competence in real-world situations. In ELT, this can involve activities such as conducting interviews in English, engaging in language exchange programs, or participating in international pen-pal exchanges. These activities take students beyond the classroom, encouraging them to use English authentically and reinforcing their language skills in practical contexts.

The Testing phase in Design Thinking within English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms plays a pivotal role in empowering students to apply their language competence authentically. Drawing from the works of Herrington and Herrington (2006), this phase aligns closely with the concept of 'authentic learning.' In their research, Herrington and Herrington emphasize the importance of learners engaging in activities that mirror real-world language use. In ELT, this could entail students conducting interviews in English, engaging in language exchange programs, or participating in cross-cultural communication experiences. Such activities challenge students to apply their language skills in practical contexts, thus reinforcing their confidence and competence in using English as a means of effective communication.

Furthermore, the Testing phase in Design Thinking resonates with the ideas put forth by Chen and MacDonald (2010) regarding the importance of learner autonomy and self-assessment. By encouraging students to test their language skills outside the classroom, educators promote learner independence and self-regulation. Through real-world application, students gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, further empowering them to take control of their language learning journey. Consequently, the Testing phase not only enhances language proficiency but also fosters a sense of ownership and adaptability, preparing students to navigate the complexities of a globalized world where effective communication is paramount.

2. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

2.1 Debate and Persuasion: Organize a class debate on a current, controversial topic or issue relevant to your learners' interests or studies. Divide the class into two groups: one group argues for the topic, and the other group argues against it. Encourage students to research and prepare their arguments using credible sources. It encourages:

- a. **Critical Thinking:** Students must critically analyze information, assess the credibility of sources, and construct persuasive arguments based on evidence.
- b. **Creative Thinking:** Students need to think creatively to find innovative ways to present their arguments and anticipate counterarguments.
- c. **Communication Skills:** This activity promotes effective communication, active listening, and the ability to articulate and defend one's ideas.

2.2 Case Studies and Problem-Solving: Provide students with real-world case studies related to their field of study or areas of interest. These case studies should present complex problems or scenarios that require creative and critical thinking to solve. In small groups, students analyze the case, identify the issues, propose solutions, and defend their recommendations. It encourages critical, creative thinking and collaboration. Promotes teamwork and collaboration as students work together to analyze and solve real-world problems.

2.3 Online Language Learning Platforms and Apps: One of the most widely used and engaging activities in English Language Teaching (ELT) that integrates technology is the use of Online Language Learning Platforms and Apps. These platforms and apps offer a variety of interactive and personalized exercises and resources that cater to different language proficiency levels and learning styles.

- a. **Gamification:** Many of these platforms use gamification techniques, turning language learning into a fun and engaging experience. Learners can earn points, badges, and rewards for completing lessons and exercises.
- b. **Adaptive Learning:** These platforms often use artificial intelligence to adapt to learners' performance, providing customized content and exercises based on individual strengths and weaknesses.
- c. **Interactive Exercises:** They offer a range of interactive exercises, including speaking and pronunciation practice, listening comprehension, grammar exercises, and vocabulary quizzes.
- d. **Mobile Accessibility:** Most platforms have mobile apps, allowing learners to practice English anytime and anywhere, making it highly convenient for busy students.
- e. **Progress Tracking:** Learners can track their progress, set goals, and receive feedback on their performance, fostering a sense of achievement and motivation.
- f. **Social Features:** Some platforms incorporate social elements, enabling learners to connect with others, compete, or collaborate on language learning challenges.

Overall, the integration of technology through online language learning platforms and apps has significantly enhanced engagement and interactivity in ELT, making it more accessible and enjoyable for learners of all ages and levels.

3. CONCLUSION

Design Thinking in ELT is not a departure from traditional language teaching but rather a transformative approach that enhances language acquisition and empowers students to become proficient communicators and innovative thinkers. Through empathy, defined language learning challenges, ideation, prototyping, and testing, students not only acquire language skills but also develop critical 21st-century skills.

By incorporating Design Thinking into ELT classrooms, educators prepare students for success in an interconnected world where effective communication, creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability are essential. As the field of ELT continues to evolve, embracing Design Thinking can be a powerful catalyst for empowering students to become confident and capable global communicators.

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