Students' Views of Their Learning Environment: The Case of a Mexican BA in English

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Abstract

This study was conducted at an English Language BA program of a public university during 2019, aimed at identifying students' perceptions about their learning environment. A common thread in research in student learning refers to the ways in which students go about learning. A theory of learning that accentuates the interaction between the person and the situation is presented. An adaptation of the Course Experience Questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as instruments to gather the information about the students' perceptions of their learning environment. The participants were students taking the Upper Intermediate English special course at the BA program. The findings present the role of the teacher as an important part inside the learning environment. Finally, conclusions about these findings are described at the end of this paper where some possible issues for action are proposed.

Key words: *Learning environment, students´ beliefs, situational factors.*

Introduction

Students' perceptions of their learning environment may affect their approach to learning since their relationship with their academic and social context is an integral part of their learning experience. This refers not just to the framework of University program, courses, class and assessment design decisions, but how students construct their learning from this framework. It is indicatedthat a deep approach to learning and a perception of course satisfaction demonstrate areciprocal relationship(Ramsden, 1997).

Several studies about learning have investigated what attributes of students' context influence them the most. These works have explored features such as the degree courses offered, size, proximity to other institutions, or source of finance. In the process of collecting information, re-designing instruments with the feedback provided and collecting information again, several dimensions have emerged, but referring to the studies in United States and Australia a more specific framework was found.

All of these studies were carried out in Anglo-Saxon countries were their native language is English, it is because of this reason they studied other fields not related with English as a foreign languages learning. They focus on the association established between deep approach to learning and students' views but not if it is any relationship in foreign languages learning. This is the reason for investigating this association in a different cultural and field context.

This mixed-method study aims at identifying students' viewsof a Mexican BA in English, not only concerned about understanding the impact of university program, course, class design and assessment decisions on their learning, but the impact of these to shed some light on the type of learning environment which is the best for these students influencing on their approach to their learning.

Literature Review

The main constructs which supported the study are: learning environment and students' beliefs.

Learning Environment

The term *environment* was framed for the first time by Paul Ramsden in 1979 and he defines it as follows:
"By context, or environment, is meant the teaching, course organisation, subject areas, and assessment methods of university departments: this definition excludes variables such as the provision of study space, residential accommodation, libraries or teaching aids. This paper examines students' own perceptions of their courses and teachers." (Ramsden, 1979).

Ramsden's first studies investigated the influence of environment on learning. His first work consisted in examining which aspects define what an academic environment is. He started his investigations in six departments at one British university. Different students' feedback by questionnaires helped to frame what type of context of learning is the most influential. Some of the aspects included in a learning environment that were reunited through these referred to content, workload (pace and difficulty), organisation of the course, explanation, enthusiasm, openness, empathy, assignments, and assessment procedures as the most relevant aspects of the context of learning (Ramsden, 1979). For purposes of this work and since it is based in this line of investigation, this concept of learning environmentis what is applied to this study.

Students' Beliefs about Learning Environment

There are several investigations which affirms that beliefs directly affect the potential academicals success or failure of students. Students' beliefs about their learning environment is one of those influential factor in their learning achievement. All human perception is influenced by beliefs, and beliefs have a cognitive, an affective, anda behavioural component which influence the ways in whichevents are understood and acted on. (Johnson, 1999, ascited in González M., 2008)

"A belief is a mental representation of reality which contains meanings, preferences and attitudes that allow the rationalization of complex and different categories of experience" (Kelly, 1991; Thompson, 1992; White, 1994,as cited in Muñoz et al., 2012)

In his investigation, Ramsden (1978) suggested that students' perceptions of their learning tasks influence the level in which their approach them. The results of his study gave information about the influence of the students' perceptions of their learning environments and the impact of this on their approaches to learning

John Biggs (1986) studied how the situational factors may influence learning and found that the way students perceive these factors may affect students' motivation to the task and its effectiveness. The factors more remarkable were the difficulty and amount of time spent on a task, the structure of the course and the methods of learning and assessment.
Alf Lizzio, Keithia Wilson & Ronald Simons (2002) investigated the relationship between university students' perceptions of their academic environment, their approaches to study, and academic outcomes at both university and faculty levels in Australia. According to the findings of Lizzios' study (2002) some propositions were presented: Perceptions of heavy workload and inappropriate assessment influence students towards surface approaches to study, but perceptions of appropriate workload do not necessary influence students towards deep approaches to study. Perceptions of a good teaching environment influence students towards deep approaches to study, and equally, students' perceptions of a bad teaching environment influence them towards surface approaches to study (Lizzio et al, 2002: 43).
These three studies are very closely related to my research in terms of the type of questions or inquiries researchers have. They seek to study students' beliefs, perceptions, and ways of seeing learning environment and their influence and impact to students' approaches to learning.

Research Design

Context

The study was carried out from February to June 2019 and took place at a School of Languages of apublic university located on the South-East of Mexico founded on 1944. The English Language undergraduate programme (English B.A., hereafter)was the programme chose to study the students' perceptions about it.

The English Language BA aims at training individuals with a wide domain of the foreign language, prepared to meet the needs of intercultural communication, generate knowledge displaying ethics, accountability, efficiency and justice in their professional activities, and able to perform in different work areas where English is the main component, such as language teaching in different educational levels. Graduates are meant to be critical, purposeful, respectful individuals who, by using foreign languages as tools, participate in the construction of a society with more and better opportunities.

In order to do this, it is necessary to have high standards in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language since most of the students of the School of Languages will be those who will be teaching this language around the country and even further. Their perspectives about their learning environments in the School of Languages could be really significant in their learning approaches and outcomes, and affect their performance in society later on.

According to the English B.A. curriculum, there are six mandatory courses of English focused on providing students with grammar and vocabulary, and opportunities to develop writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. These coursessyllabi reflect the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In addition, in each course, students are expected to improve their proficiency in English which is backed by the book used. Due to the course and book used at this school, learners can be divided into three main categories in regard to the CEFR levels: basic users (beginner, elementary), independent users (pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate) and proficient users (advanced).

Participants

For the purpose of this research, this study was conducted with students taking the upper intermediate English course of their BA program. Originally, they were chosen for two main reasons: 1) they are supposed to have a language level that would allow them to answer the Course Experience Questionnaire, which was in English; 2) because of their academic progress, they will still be studying their BA program for at least one year from now, and therefore, can be located for further investigation; as they will be whether repeating the upper intermediate English course or taking the advanced English course.

It is important to mention that these students were enrolled in this special course which they could not take before for reason of their low achieving performance or because they are taking the course for a second time since they failed the first one. This course was open especially for these students in order to regular their academic situation that was in risk in the moment of this study for the reasons mentioned before.

There were 42 learners altogether attending Upper Intermediate English level divided into two groups. They were taking their English course with the same teacher in the afternoon shift. A total of 35 questionnaires were administered and answered. It was not possible to locate the other 7 students because they did not attend their English course regularly.

For the interview, 4 students from the ones who had answered the questionnaire were chosen. They were chosen according to their outcomes during this term. Two of them obtained the highest scores in their Upper-Intermediate English course and two of them obtained the lowest scores. They were selected this way to take into consideration the perceptions of different type of students and therefore have the possibility to establish actions to improve the learning approach and outcomes of those students who need it most.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to address two questions. Firstly, what are students' perceptions of their learning environment? Secondly, which aspects of the learning environment influence students more positively or negatively?

Instruments

The data collection instruments used for this study were the Course Experience Questionnaire, which is an adaptation of previous studies, and a semi-structured interview which was especially designed for this study based on the categories of the questionnaire.

Course Experience Questionnaire

The specific environment instrument is called "Course Experience Questionnaire" (CEQ) and has been administered, analysed and reorganized for more than fifteen years in Australia. This questionnaire, which was designed for a higher

education context, contains the following six scales: Good Teaching Scale; Clear Goals Scale; Generic Skills Scale; Appropriate Assessment Scale; Appropriate Workload Scale; and Emphasis on Independence Scale.

The original instrument consisted of 37 questions in total with a random number of questions per scale. In order to achieve higher cooperation from the participants, the number of questions was reduced to four questions per scale, which led to a final version containing four items for each scale. Items in the CEQ were arranged in cyclical order so that the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth items respectively in each block measured Good Teaching, Clear Goals, Generic Skills, Appropriate Assessment, Appropriate Workload, and Emphasis on Independence. For example, items 1, 7, 13, and 19 belong to the Good Teaching Scale. Similarly the second scale, Clear goals, consists of items 2, 8, 14, and 20.As for the analysis, the questionnaire included the LIKERT scale of agreement questions that limit the respondent to choose between the following options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, or Strongly agree. The Agreement percentage was the measure used to analyse responses to the CEQ survey. It shows the number of students with a positive response to a given question. The Agreement percentage is calculated by adding the number of responses given to the 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) responses and dividing this total by the total number of all responses to the question.

Interview

The interview was designed specifically for this study and contained the six scales of the CEQ questionnaire: Good Teaching Scale; Clear Goals Scale; Generic Skills Scale; Appropriate Assessment Scale; Appropriate Workload Scale; and Emphasis on Independence Scale. One main question was designed for each scale as well as three alternative questions to give further information if required. Students' answers to the interview were categorized according to the previous scale. In addition, sub-categories were obtained from the answers. These categories clarify the views of the students about their learning context.

Findings and Discussion

Quantitative findings

First of all, the results of the quantitative instrument, the CEQ questionnaire, give a general view of the perceptions about the program of the Upper-Intermediate English students who repeated their English course. Table 1 shows the percentage of the positive and negative perceptions of these students about the program.

Category Perceptions	Teacher performance	Clear Goals	Skills other than language	Student Assessment	Workload	Development of Independence
Positive	48%	50%	63%	34%	31%	47%
Negative	52%	50%	37%	66%	69%	53%

Table 1. Percentages of Positive and Negative perceptions of at risk students about the program

Table 2 shows in more detail the positive or negative students' perceptions of these categories. The data is interpreted as follows: strongly disagree (1.0-1.8), disagree (1.9-2.6), neutral (2.7-3.4), agree (3.5-4.2) and strongly agree (4.3-5.0).

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teacher Performance	3.09	3.5
Clear Goals	3.15	4.4
Skills other than Language	3.09	5.7
Student Assessment	3.12	3.26
Workload	3.06	4.05
Development of Independence	3.12	3.9

Table 2. Perceptions of at risk students about the learning environment of the program

Only half of the students who answered the Course Experienced Questionnaire were satisfied with the Teaching Practice of the Academics of the University were this research was carried out. Half of the students had it clear what the goals of the program were. 63% of the students agreed that they have developed other skills apart from the established in the curriculum of this program. Assessment is one of those categories in which the participants expressed more disagreement in the questionnaire, a relatively small number considered assessment appropriate. Workload is also the other one of the highest percentages of students who do not agree or completely agree with it. Finally, almost half of the students agree that this program develops their autonomy.

It is clear that none of the six categories has a strong percentage of either totallypositive or negative perceptions, which probably means that, although with a certain degree of conformity to the way things are done in the program, students' needs and expectations of the learning environment in the B.A. program are not completely covered.

This was especially evident for two categories in the questionnaire, which were lower in positive agreement compared with the rest: assessment and workload. Nevertheless, when interviewing the students, the only evident complaint was regarding student assessment.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative data were analyzed with the same categories than those used for the quantitative analysis, but some of them were divided into subcategories that emerged from the participants' discourse in the semi-structured interview. These subcategories express the students' beliefs about their learning environment. Table 3 summarizes the main categories and their sub-categories as well as examples taken from the data.

Categories	*Subcategories*	*Quotes that exemplify*
Teacher performance	Methodology used by the teacher	-"…los maestros solamente te guían, te enseñan las bases y ya todo lo demás lo demás depende de ti…" (P3)
	Level of knowledge of the teacher	- "y que tenga un buen manejo del inglés… algunos maestros tienen un poco más de conocimientos que algunos otros…" (P3).
	Motivation that the teacher provides	"…(hay algunos maestros) como que te motivan a ser como ellos en su forma de enseñanza…" (P2)
Clear Goal		"…que llegue a ser un buen maestro algún día… o un traductor… depende del área que elijas…" (P1)
Skills other than language	Communicative Skills	"… si las habilidades de poderme comunicar con las personas…" (P2)
	Confidence	"…mi confianza ha incrementado a la hora de hablar con otras personas y en público…" (P3)
	Socialization	"… pues para ser […] más social, o sea, ser más abierta a, pues gente muy diferente a mí…" (P4)
Student Assessment	About teacher assessment methodology	"pues hay varias formas (de evaluación), cada maestro tiene su forma de evaluar y pues hay que ajustarse a ellas… los maestros son los que ponen las formas de evaluación y pues uno tiene que cumplir con ellas…" (P2).
	About Standard Exams	"…siento que deberían evaluar otras cosas… faltan ahí otras cosas que también se pueden evaluar…en las otras (experiencias educativas)… siento que es más equitativo porque se basan en toda la […] o sea, todo el desarrollo que tuviste en el semestre…" (P1)
Workload		"…algunas (veces) no te dejan mucha, depende del maestro…al principio me costaba un poco, pero ya después como que me fui confiando con más cosas…" (P1)
Development of Independence		"…esta carrera siento que es, la mayor parte me enseña a ser autónomo porque depende de ti aprender todo el vocabulario, todas las…la gramática…" (P3)

<u>Table 3</u>. Summary of qualitative analysis of data

Teacher Performance

When analysed in depth, the answers of the interview show three main aspects which students considered important for good teaching performance: the methodology used by the teacher, the level of knowledge of the teacher, and the motivation the teacher provided.

Methodology used by the teacher

When talking about the teacher's methodology, the students perceived that they were left alone in their learning process, with hardly any presence of the teacher, as the following comment suggests:

"…los maestros solamente te guían, te enseñan las bases y ya todo lo demás lo demás depende de ti…si quieres ser mejor, pues vas a ser mejor por tu propia cuenta no por los maestros." (P3).

The comment of participant 2 mentions another important aspect which may be interpreted as if students were learning on their own and not because the teacher was guiding them appropriately through the curriculum of the program. It

seems as if this teacher at that moment did not follow the program of the course: "…algunos maestros no […]se acoplan al programa…".

Level of knowledge of the teacher

The level of knowledge of the teacher was also important for these students, as was pointed out by participant 3 who affirmed that the low language proficiency of her teacher hindered her own learning process: "y que tenga un buenmanejodel inglés… algunos maestros tienen un poco más de conocimientos que algunosotros…".

Motivation provided by the teacher

Finally, the importance given to motivation can be perceived in the comments given by three different participants:

"…hay algunos maestros que te motivan a ser […] a terminar tu carrera…" (P3)

"…(hay algunos maestros) como que te motivan a ser como ellos en su forma de enseñanza…" (P2)

"…quisiera tener más motivación para aprender… poder asistir a más eventos o estar más en contacto con gente…" (Int. P4).

Not only students present the teacher as model to follow but also they may suggest that some teachers are doing something that demotivates them to engage with what they are learning.

Clear Goals

Clear goals rated highly in the quantitative data. Only half of the students seemed to havea clear idea of the goals of the program. For example, Participant 1 realized that the professional goal depends on the type of professional they would like to become: "…que llegue a ser un buen maestro algún día… o un traductor… depende del área que elijas…", while participant 3 referred only to the teaching profession: "…que sea un buen maestro…".Participants 2 and 4, on the other hand, express a wider view of the goals of the BA programme:

"… se esperaba un profesionista que se supiera desenvolver en las áreas de […] donde el inglés es hablado (…) desarrollar programas educativos en los que el inglés juega un papel preponderante para las nuevas generaciones…" (P2)

"…contribuir más en un aprendizaje nuevo para las nuevas generaciones…" (P4)

According to these answers, it was found that these students' perceptions about the goals at the end of the program aim at preparing English Teachers, Translators, English Language Curriculum designers or professionals of the English Language in any place where English is spoken. This diversification, and apparent ambiguity, in students' perceptions could have its origin in the ambiguity of the general goal established in the program:

"La licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa tiene dos metas fundamentales: lograr que alcances un alto dominio del inglés – correspondiente al nivel C1 del Marco de Referencia Europeo de Lenguas Extranjeras—y que obtengas los elementos indispensables para que te puedas dedicar a la docencia y/o a la traducción, o en cualquier otra área en donde la lengua inglesa sea una herramienta principal." (taken from: http://www.uv.mx/idiomas/principal/lengua-inglesa/).

In the previous quotation of the goal of the BA, it is affirmed that there are two main goals, but at the end it is mentioned that the purpose is to reach a high proficiency in the English Language, the elements for teaching practice, translation practice and any area where English Language is the main tool, which corresponds to the description mentioned by the participants in the interview.

Skills other than language

There were only three comments that referred to other skills that the participants said that they had acquired in the BA programme. These answers express different aspects of communication skills. One of these skills is identified as communicative skills in the target language by participant 2: "…las habilidades de podermecomunicar con las personas (in other languages)…" The second skill is related to the confidence that is needed for communicating in another language, as expressed by participant 3: "…mi confianza ha incrementado a la hora de hablar con otras personas y enpúblico…" The last one is socialization with people of different ways of life, or cultures, suggested by the comment of participant 4: "… pues para ser […] más social, o sea, ser másabierta a, puesgentemuydiferente a mí…"

It is interesting to notice that the participants only focused on skills related to communication, but did not identify other skills that are developed in the programme.It may well be that these participants understand language and linguistic communication as the main goals of the BA programme since the BA is one in English Language. They may not pay attention to skills, such as information skills, literacy skills or critical thinking skills, either because they do not identify these skills, or they feel that they are not being developed (or sufficiently developed) in their studies.

Student Assessment and the role of the teacher

The role of the teacher in assessment is perceived by the participants as an important factor for their achievement since they related both during the interviews.The answers suggest that a high percentage of students disagreed with how teachers assessed them in general; that is, they considered that the assessment of the courses had been partial. Participant 3 mentions this fairness of the assessment: "…algunashansidojustas, otras… hansidoinjustas…" and after, this participant as well as participant 2 affirm that the type of assessment depends on the teacher and his methodology of assessment:

"…algunos maestros son razonables en sus formas de evaluar algunos otros son muy flexibles, pero hay otros que… son muy estrictos en su forma de evaluar…" (P3)

"pues hay varias formas (de evaluación), cada maestro tiene su forma de evaluar y pues hay que ajustarse a ellas… los maestros son los que ponen las formas de evaluación y pues uno tiene que cumplir con ellas…" (P2).

This participant suggests that he accomplishes what he was told to do as if there were no other options to choose from. He affirms that students have to comply with the way of assessment of their teachers. He adds that the teachers decide how they assess students, which can vary from teacher to teacher, and that they have no choice but to try to adapt to them to meet the teachers' expectations.Another opinion that shows the importance of the teacher's role in assessment is about the feedback received. Participant 4 suggests that teachers sometimes do not explain the assessment criteria to their students, neither why they obtained the grades they were given. This participant wanted to know about the decisions of the grades established at the end of the course:

"…en otras pues quisiera… tener más información porque fui […] evaluada […] con bajos valores, tener más conocimiento de cómo fue […] como es que he estado haciendo…" (P4).

Because of all of these answers, it seems that assessment for these students is not about the method, but about how the teacher interpreted itand the fact that the students are not informed about it. It is interesting to notice that only one participant from four makes reference to the standardized assessment of their English courses, and this comment shows some disagreement about this methodology although the standardized assessment is based on international agreements of assessing English as a Second and Foreign Language.

"…en las otras (experiencias educativas)… siento que es más equitativo porque se basan en toda la […] o sea, todo el desarrollo que tuviste en el semestre…"(P1)

It is important to emphasize that the lowest achieving students werethose who expressed more their opinion regarding the way they were assessed, connecting this to the teacher's role.

Workload

Participants' perceptions about the quantity of workload are variable. Two of the participants' perceptions are that it is reasonable enough as expressed in the opinion of participant 2: **"pues hasta ahorita no, no hansidomuchas las tareas que me dejan"** as well as the opinion of participant 3: "…es razonable la cantidadde tareas no es mucha, a la semana no es mucha, igualtenemos días para hacer las tareas…"It should be pointed out that these two opinions were given by the participants whose score is the highest in their level which means that perceptions about the quantity of workload may be a variable to consider for analysing the outcomes of students. On the other hand, participant 1, a low achiever, pointed out that the quantity of workload depends on the teacher of the course "…algunas (veces) no tedejanmucha, depende del maestro". At the same time, she comments that the biggest effort was at the beginning of the program: "al principio me costaba un poco, peroyadespuéscomo que me fuiconfiando con máscosas…"

Although the students perceived that the workload was heavy, participants1 and 4 agree that this is adequate to the contents of the course:

"… está bien las tareas que dejan porque te sirven para practicar todo lo que sabes…" (P1)
"…siempre pensamos que es mucho… pero yo sé que esto nos ayuda a aprender más…" (P4)

Lastly, it is noticeable how high achieving students perceive the workload in a very different way from the low achievers. The high achievers express that quantity of work to do not much whilethe low achieving students say the opposite. These low achievers nevertheless agree that the workload is adequate. One of them relates the workload with the role of the teacher, turning the teacher into the crucial factor to determine workload.

Development of Independence

Although students agree that the BAprogram that they are enrolled in develops their learner autonomy, it seems that this perception of independence might have a negative connotation since their comments in the interview revealed some type of annoyance. Participant 1 confirms this when saying that she has to find a way to help herself, especially in the English course which is fundamental in the BA program: "en la materia de inglés he tenido que ser

másindependiente y practicaryo…y tenerapoyo extra… para ayudarme". Participant 3 and participant 4 extendthisopinion:

"…esta carrera siento que es, la mayor parte me enseña a ser autónomo porque depende de ti aprender todo el vocabulario, todas las…la gramática…"(P3)
"… yobusco las maneras de… aprender…" (P4).

Participant 3 mentions that she learned to work on her own because "learning depends on you". However, she makes reference to the students' over-reliance on the teacher to learn all the vocabulary and all the grammar, as if therewere no teacher involvement in the process at all. These students seemed to be complaining that they had not received the support that they needed to be successful in their learning and that therefore they were forced to learn independentlyas a last resource. They felt that they had very often been left on their own to learn.

Conclusions & Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of their learning environment. This exploration aimed at identifying relevant issues to help low achieving students improve their outcomes.

In the spirit of translating research findings into practice, it is necessary to process all the information given by the Course Experience Questionnaire and the semi-structured interview as a base for the planning of improvements. Although the interviews provided useful information about the students' perceptions, it is necessary to collect more information of this type from students, since different information presented in the categories of the Course Experienced Questionnaire appeared and it is necessary to go more in depth about this information.

Yet, some conclusions can be drawn. First, the relation between students' perceptions of their learning environment and their academic performance starts to emerge, since most of the positive opinions regarding their learning environment were given by the students who scored highest in their group of the Upper-Intermediate English course, and the negative opinions were mainly given by the two students who scored the lowest. Moreover, the highest achieving students gave more information in their interviews than those students who were low achievers.Second, the data obtained in the interview suggests that the role of the teacher emerges as an important variable to consider in their learning environment, especially in the aspects of assessment and workload. Nevertheless, the low achieving students were those who provided this information which may suggest that low achieving students are more dependent on the teacher than high achieving students. It seems that these elements of the learning environment are under the teacher's control in the context of this study and this can influence both the way students approach their learning and the learning outcomes they may achieve.

In view of the preceding, some possible issues for action can be proposed. Workload and assessment practices could be reviewed for three reasons. First, previous studies have related these two aspects of the learning environment as influencing students toward a surface approach to learning. Second, appropriate interventions regarding these aspects offer potentially great rewards in terms of positive impacts on learning. Third, a change in these aspects of the learning environment may influence the possibility of initial success in other areas. (Lizzio et al. 2002, p.45)

A second issue for action implies a review of teacher practices regarding assessment and workload in this context.
A third issue is an increased application of strategies to help students to discover and develop their learner autonomy, since the beliefs expressed by these participants suggest a high degree of student reliance on their teachers.

Finally, a fourth issue points towards the need to develop an academic environment that is appropriate for the low achieving students to improve their learning outcomes. This environment needs to pay attention not only to assessment, but also to workload, teacher methodology, clear goals, other skills than language and independence. Students' perceptions are only one source of information in making decisions about student learning. In view of the fact that many of the aspects of learning are yet unexplored, it is important to ask more and more specific questions to students about their learning environment in order to search for answers in real contexts.

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