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A Case for an Ecological Approach and against Language Commodification in ELT

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A Case for an Ecological Approach and
Against Language Commodification in ELT

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an alternative approach to the English language education practiced in many developing countries which can help reverse their current low-proficiency status, as revealed by standard international examinations such as the PISA scores and others. The author argues that this can be best accomplished by adopting an ecological approach to teaching which promotes language learning as emergent and socially situated phenomena, two concepts largely neglected by current teaching methods. In fact, many of these countries have long been dominated by an extremely commodified and cognitivist ELT market, where business interests have taken precedence over pedagogical considerations. Additionally, as courses are increasingly modified to accommodate the demands of this market, making them fit to be commercialized, the resulting conditions of learning cease to reflect the conditions of language use in real life situations. This misalignment, then, leads to linguistic knowledge that ultimately becomes inert, as students find themselves unable to transfer what they have learned in class to situations of use outside. In light of the above, an ecological approach is being proposed here as both an attempt to reconcile such contrived educational practices with language learning as observed in natural settings, and as a sign of resistance against the reproductive and capitalist ideals of language commodification.

Keywords: ecology of learning, SCT, language emergence, situated learning, multilingualism, language commodification

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Ecology

Systems Approach

Experiential Learning

Sociolinguistics

Second Language Learning

Plurilingualism

Cultural Pluralism

Commodification

Academic Standards

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Introduction

In light of today's rapidly growing global market, propelled by the dominant ideals of capitalism, schools have become yet another business niche with tempting promises of economic prosperity and work stability. Following this trend, the English Language Teaching (ELT) market has certainly become the target of many entrepreneurs, who see in it the opportunity of making a quick profit out of what has currently become an essential component of any resume. After all, English has today consolidated itself as the world's *lingua franca*, as well as the official language of the Internet, and for these reasons a great number of schools have seen fit to turn this language into a highly coveted 'commodity', shifting the focus from making it more 'learnable' to making it more 'saleable'. However, and as will become clearer in this paper, such language commodification scenario presents great challenges for the proper development of a lesson, especially in regards to matters of personalizing content and instruction, as business interests begin to conflict with their pedagogical counterparts.

As pointed out by Kramsch and Steffensen (2008), the implications of such diverging agendas are not only felt in the classroom, but also have a direct impact on the priorities set by much of the research done in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA): "By being tightly linked to the field of language education, [SLA] is hostage to the criteria of educational success recognizable and acceptable by a general public that does not necessarily espouse ecological views of education" (p.24). To offer an ecological alternative, then, is at once to move against today's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching culture as well as against the market which has helped instill such a 'commodified' way of thinking among learners.

An example of such public-driven ELT market (or, perhaps, market-induced-public-driven ELT) is the ongoing demand for a reduction in the period one is expected to go from zero beginner to the level of a fluent and/or proficient speaker in the second language (L2). In Brazil, for instance, it has become typical practice to offer 18-month long courses which guarantee expedited results based on the premise that they have done away with much of the writing found in regular courses, and are now able to redirect their attention to oral production alone.

In truth, though, foreign language education in many places around the world has been long plagued by a barrage of methods, which owing to the commercialization agenda, have elected to frame language as an object out there to be acquired either through behavior conditioning, input/output processing, or both. A common thread in these approaches is their subscription to the 'acquisition metaphor' which, according to Sfar (1998), "compels us to think of knowledge as a commodity that is accumulated by the learner and to construe the mind as the repository where the learner hoards the commodity" (cited in Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p. 155).

In addition to adopting an objective and rationalistic view of language, commodification efforts have contributed to instruction modeled after traditional schooling principles, that is, teacher-fronted presentation, reinforcement exercises, reductionist simulations of reality, and finally discrete-point tests. The main problem with approaching language instruction this way, from an ecological standpoint, is that it completely disregards the role that the social context plays in the acquisition of a language's system. In fact, this observation is seen as crucial by van Lier (2004): "An ecological theory holds that if you take the context away there is no language left to be studied" (Ch.1:83).

Such decontextualized and formal treatment of language has largely been the result of a long-standing bias towards 'usage' as opposed to 'use' in Widdowson's terminology, that is, emphasis has been given to the abstract knowledge of the rules governing how a language is structured, to contrast with its unruly manifestation in social practice. According to Widdowson (1979), though, usage and use are both constitutive of language performance, as he notes:

Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, that aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. (1.2:4)

On the other hand, the separation of these aspects of language has contributed to instruction which favors a focus on grammar at the sentence level, while downplaying all the creative ways in which language manifests itself in naturally-occurring interaction, which tends to be realized in the level of discourse. Such creative ways of language use, in turn, are dependent on an ongoing dynamic and meaningful interaction with the social environment, as Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) have made clear by saying: "...second language learning [is not only] the acquisition of a new set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological forms but [also] a struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture" (p.155).

In the attempt of providing a historical account on the above bias towards 'usage', Widdowson (1979) links it all the way back to Saussure's and more recently to Chomsky's similarly proposed dichotomies: "The distinction between usage and use is related to de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and Chomsky's similar distinction between *competence* and *performance*" (1.2:4). Chomsky's competence points to an individual's abstract representation of language as a system, which is inaccessible for direct inspection, as well as thought to consist of a finite combination of structures. In contrast, performance refers to the largely unpredictable utterances derived from such mental system (Chomsky, 1965).

It seems relevant to draw such a comparison, as it alludes to a long-standing tendency among researchers and ELT practitioners alike to attempt to describe language and learning from the standpoint of dichotomies. Though Chomsky's polar description of language differs from that of Widdowson's usage/use, as the former refers to a larger scale parallel between the mind/brain and the social in dictating language development, whereas the latter outlines two constituting aspects of performance, they do share the either-or assumption inherent in any dichotomy.

Under an ecological approach, though, language is better seen as a complex system, constantly being shaped by, and indeed shaping, the social environment in which it occurs, and within which it is made meaningful. Following this logic, then, one can hardly expect that such knowledge of abstract linguistic rules be properly apprehended in the absence of context. On the contrary, it must be inferred 'through' use. The following quote hints at this point: "If language is in the world at the same time as it is in the head, then we need to account for its integrated existence, rather than adopt positions that reduce the life – the humanity – out of language" (Atkinson, 2002: 537).

Another key issue under the current cognitivist orientation in ELT is the idea of 'standardization', that is, the attempt, especially by large commercial schools, to facilitate and expedite the implementation and accountability of their methods across different branches and among different teachers by means of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. A move that seems to reflect an underlying operational premise of schools these days, as van Lier (2004) notes: "Schooling usually means conforming to a standard in terms of expression and genre, it implies 'sounding the same,' which is sounding like an educated speaker" (Ch.4:28). Alas, standardization efforts not only kill diversity in language development when lessons must follow a fixed routine, but it also neglects the concept of emergence as it prescribes a monolithic syllabus and culture for all students to follow, regardless of their preferences and goals for learning the target language.

This view is directly supported by Kramsch and Steffensen (2008): "standardization in educational practice expresses the need to eliminate diversity and to exercise control, both notions that are incompatible with language ecology" (p.26). To be sure, in schools' insistence on imposing order to the chaos, they end up causing unnecessary strain to students' learning efforts, for attempting to exercise control over something that is unpredictable by nature. An idea expressed by Thornbury (2012): "Language learning, whether classroom-based or naturalistic, whether in an EFL or an ESL [English as a Second Language] context, is capricious, opportunistic, idiosyncratic and seldom amenable to external manipulation" (*P is for post-modern method*, :4).

Indeed, cognitivism and behaviorism have until now been the preferred choice of many EFL institutions worldwide, for we still live in a world "in which the preeminent metaphors are computationalism and the mind as a container" (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p.155). In addition,

these theories naturally lend themselves to a focus on usage, as well as are supportive of a standardization agenda, which as discussed before are central to a view of language commodification. Surely, these approaches do provide the simplest and most minimalistic explanations for how languages are learned, and thus are to be preferred than more complex ones as expressed by the Occam's Razor theory (cited in van Lier, 2004, Ch.1:43)

The decontextualized view of language described so far does not seem to be conducive to the kind of learning that fosters such communicative competence as exhibited by proficient speakers of the target language, whether they are monolingual or multilingual. For, as mentioned before, once the social context is removed language becomes devoid of its meaning-making capacity, the same way that a computer's software algorithm is meaningless if seen 'for what it is' (words on paper), rather than 'for what it yields' (an interactive and useful program on a computer or mobile device). Therefore, under an ecological approach, language is treated for its symbolic representations as part of any other semiotic activity in the world. And, naturally, its learning should proceed in a similar fashion.

The centrality of context in language learning is further highlighted by Kramsch and Steffensen (2008): "cognition, says SCT [Sociocultural Theory], occurs first on the social plane and only later gets internalized on the psychological plane in the form of inner speech in interaction with more capable peers" (p.21). Along these lines, Hopper (1998) adds that grammar is not a prerequisite of communication, but rather a byproduct of it, further supporting the prevalence of the social over the psychological. At last, Widdowson (1979) cautions to the potential adverse effects of not acknowledging the foregoing subsidiary role of grammar: "by

focussing on usage, therefore, the language teacher directs the attention of the learner to those features of performance which normal use of language requires him to ignore" (1.6:5).

It seems safe to say by now that language is not meant to be taught as simply another school subject, but rather as the social phenomenon it stands for, sparked from the need to communicate with others, and leveraged in the exercise of one's identity in a community of practice. Not least, language is contingent on the affordances and configurations of the social environment, and operates as a function of an individual's worldview and hidden agendas for a given interaction. For that reason, the present work has elected to adopt Larsen-Freeman's (2009) definition of language as a Complex Adaptive System, as well as van Lier's (2004) descriptions of its nature as "emergent, not fixed, in flux rather than static" (Ch.4:29), and which is "constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted in every act of speaking" (Ch.4:45).

The apparent refusal to acknowledge such views, has caused many of today's ELT practices to exhibit an educational anomaly the author has called the *paradox of instructed language learning*, as these pedagogies end up taxing and hindering the very process they claim to expedite and facilitate. Under the cover of a compellingly convenient method, materialized in the form of a highly attractive textbook, schools have succeeded in their efforts to compartmentalize and streamline the language curriculum in order to make it better suited for commercialization. Meanwhile, students have been developing linguistic behavior in the target language that is anomalous to what is normally observed in communication between proficient speakers of the target language. For the most part, students are able to write well, yet fail to keep up with the impromptu nature of spoken interaction, which they tend to blame on their inability to recall what they have learned in class.

Truthfully, though, these students have been mostly fed declarative knowledge of the language, which they find difficult to transfer into real-life situations of use, and consequently rendering such knowledge 'inert'. This assumption has been well captured by Larsen-Freeman (2012) in her address at the 28th SPELT Conference: "What use is knowledge that students don't know how to use?". The concern raised by this quote is not new, though, having been pointed out long ago by Whitehead (1929) when he brought to the fore what he then termed 'The Inert Knowledge Problem', which is believed to derive from a misalignment between the conditions of learning in the classroom and those of use outside.

As a result, it is not uncommon to observe such language use patterns as hesitant speech and communication breakdowns, not to mention learners' low self-esteem when using the language. In fact, when traveling abroad, these learners often experience numerous intercultural faux pas as well as low credibility as a speaker, leading to stressful and ineffective communication. In addition, students' linguistic knowledge tend to undergo a natural and gradual decay in the long term, eventually causing them to altogether avoid conversational situations in the L2.

When questioned about such fate, it is common for schools to dismiss such a glitch in their methods as the students' own failure to have sought enough opportunities of language practice outside, while taking their course. However, if fluency in another language were more dependent on the student's ability to use it 'outside' school, away from the close assistance of a teacher, then one would not see much use for schools in any way. Indeed, language schools serve learners better when they coach them into the social norms of interaction in the target speech

community, and under learning conditions which attempt to replicate the way these communicative encounters take place in real life situations.

An ecological approach is able to provide such assistance by offering a more context-sensitive perspective of language which recognizes its emergent nature within the symbolically rich, dynamic and contested environment of social interaction. As such, it is an optimal alternative to prepare learners for real-life communication, because it mirrors in more ways than other methods do the circumstances of language use learners are expected to encounter outside of class. To put it another way, an ecological view of learning sees it as emerging from 'participation' in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Conducting language learning this way accomplishes more than simply teaching language as a means for communication, but it also presents it as a channel for self-expression as well as a way through which a social identity can be developed. This view is corroborated by Kramsch and Steffensen (2008) as they assert that: "Language is not just a mode of communication but a symbolic statement of social and cultural identity" (p.20). In the face of such realization, the negative effects of language commodification are suddenly exacerbated, for not only has it oversimplified the learning process in light of how it is perceived to occur in the real world, but it has also dehumanized the role language plays in the formation of an acting individual in society.

Next, in Chapter 1, the author presents an in-depth account of ELT's current scenario of language commodification and its impact on learning outcomes, while in Chapter 2 I attempt to identify and categorize the main pedagogical pitfalls that are preventing learners from attaining proper communicative competence in English. Following that, I make a case in Chapter 3 for an

Ecological Approach as a more realistic alternative to language learning, which I do so by outlining its main tenets under a sociocultural perspective, as well as its arguments against language commodification. At last, in Chapter 4, I list a few implications of adopting an ecological approach into the EFL classroom.

Chapter 1: The Language Commodification Scenario

The ability to speak a second language today is no longer the luxury of a few, in fact there has been growing demand for multilingual professionals who can speak at least one language other than English and the mother tongue. Such know-how has been key for better job positions and higher salaries, as well as a means to gain entry into higher education anywhere in the world. In any case, English is still the top-priority among second languages, as revealed in the latest EF English Proficiency Index: "English is increasingly considered a core competency in a globalized economy" (English First, 2014, p.7).

Sadly, though, in most developing countries, many students get around this language requirement by relying on questionable school certifications to prove their status as proficient speakers in the target language. After all, most companies and universities here hardly ever verify such language competency claims by demanding proof from more reliable sources, such as scores from international proficiency examinations or by conducting their own local evaluations. This situation has a direct impact on the efficiency of a language method, as it prevents students from making a real effort to learn the language, while encouraging schools to be overly lenient with their students' assessment in order to facilitate learning for such uninvolved students.

Indeed, poor service is what has been observed in Brazil's ELT scenario all the way since 2011, when the first publication of the EF English Proficiency Index was released. In all its four issues, Brazil has ranked in their Low Proficiency band, trailing behind some of its Latin American neighbors, such as Peru and Ecuador in the most recent publication (English First,

2014, p.8). One would think that with all the course offerings available in the country, Brazilians would be more than well catered for in their English learning needs. The above contradiction, then, only serves to reinforce the paradox of instructed language learning here presented, and to underscore the need to seek alternative approaches to teaching EFL that can reverse such impoverished results.

It only takes a quick look, though, in order to witness the existence of a multitude of outdated methods, such as the Audiolingual method and various 'weak' implementations of the Communicative Approach (Howatt, 1984), which can be respectively linked to behaviorism and cognitivism, though the latter only indirectly. These learning theories have been ostensibly debunked and criticized in the past few decades, mostly by new approaches that ascribe a more central role to interaction and the social environment in the formation of an individual's linguistic capabilities. Indeed, the main criticism levied at cognitivism and behaviorism is that they create a divide between acquiring the abstract representations of language, and the processes involved in social interaction, two concepts an ecological theory sees as indissociable and mutually-informing.

Nonetheless, current pedagogical practices can only go so far in explaining the paradox in question, but also beg one to consider the political-economic clash of interests involved in the process of language commodification. In other words, while the school preoccupies itself with 'numbers' (clientele, profits, etc.), and the students with acquiring a certificate, the teacher is caught in the middle of this crossfire, charged with the double task of serving both school and students' interests while carrying out his own pedagogical goals. Meanwhile, the greatest purpose

for all three players coming together in the first place, that is, *learning*, remains for the most part underserved.

In its own way, the above conflict contributes to a commonplace yet unspoken practice known as 'teaching for show', which is geared at providing what van Lier (2004) has termed 'learning opportunities of a reaping kind', that is, immediate, measurable, tangible, and which reflects a view of language as commodity. Also, such tokens as grades on a test, a correct answer to a teacher's in-class inquiry, or the recall of isolated words or phrases previously taught all seem to be enough for students (or they have been led to see all that as enough). Meanwhile, the ability to conduct effective conversations under the challenges presented by real-life communication remains in the sidelines of core instructional practices. Conversely, there are 'learning opportunities of a sowing kind', that is, long-term and lasting learning, which most classrooms today are found lacking, for reasons further explained by van Lier:

[...] in the sowing situation we may be unable to tell, the seeds lie hidden beneath the surface, and may or may not bear fruit, at some unspecified time in the future, in some unspecified way. That is too much uncertainty for learners, teachers, administrators, let alone politicians". (Ch.1:47)

The commercialization of schooling has prevailed until now by creating a dependence on its services, as learners assume that an active knowledge of a second language can only be maintained provided they are constantly receiving instruction. By leveraging the popular saying 'practice makes perfect' as a pedagogical crutch, schools have succeeded in deflecting the blame

for students' eventual *inert knowledge*, as the latter are led to perceive their learning failure from a lack of disposition towards practice. As a result, students are often seen returning to school for so-called *brush-up lessons*, as soon as they realize their English skills are not adequate to real world demands of language use.

To counter such linguistic fate, an ecological approach seeks to promote learning opportunities of both reaping and sowing kinds, as it understands that learning will always belong to learners, whereas teaching to teachers, thus any successful pedagogy needs to accommodate both viewpoints in an integrative manner. In addition, the inherent diversity and particularity of classroom life also needs to be recognized, requiring that former modernist perspectives of knowledge as "unitary, stable, objective and disinterested" (Thornbury, 2012:6) be altogether abandoned. Likewise, the old mindset of learning as a "one-way road from ignorance to knowledge" (Felman, 1987, cited by Thornbury, 2012:6) should also be replaced for a more ecological and humanistic perspective.

This provides momentum for a postmodern pedagogy, which according to Breen (1999): "locates *experience* as a core starting point and constant focus of attention", and in which "classroom work builds upon learner and teacher experiences. [Thus,] the focus is on doing things, upon action, and interpreting the experience of, and outcomes from action" (p.54). A major objective of learning, seen from this postmodern perspective, is then "to acquire new voices and new ways of articulating experiences and ideas" (p.60).

One way of realizing these ecological ideals within language schools is by adopting what has been called 'the porous classroom', "in which the boundaries between the classroom, the school, the society, and the world are weak and permeable" (Thornbury, 2012:10). Surely, the

rapid ascension of technology, especially in terms of the greater mobility and connectivity afforded by smartphones and tablets, not to mention the newest Interactive White Boards (IWBs), have become important allies in the attempt to blur these boundaries. Breen (1999) is pictorial in his description of this new concept:

The language classroom ceases to be the place where knowledge of language is made available by teacher and materials for learners and becomes the place from which knowledge of language and its use is sought by teacher and learners together, the classroom walls become its windows. (p.55)

In essence, the idea of a porous classroom can be seen as the scaffold which facilitates, and indeed makes possible, the fostering of learning opportunities of a sowing kind, which in conjunction with their more immediate and tangible counterparts are able to provide students with a learning experience that is both motivating as well as long-lasting.

The next chapter deals with the specific issues affecting foreign language education today, and which are perceived as direct contributors to the misalignment between the conditions of learning in class and those of use outside.

Chapter 2: Issues Affecting Learning

As proposed before, the paradox of instructed language learning has caused students to exhibit performance in the L2 anomalous to that of a proficient speaker, as conditions of learning do not align with conditions of use, thus making the transfer of knowledge problematic. It has also been pointed out as the root of such a paradox the choice of essentially cognitivist and outdated learning methods which situate learning exclusively 'in the head', neglecting the role the social environment plays in the formation of an acting individual in the target speech community. Lastly, the political-economic clash of interests emerging from the fusion between school and business, for the most part caused by language commodification efforts, has also been shown as having a part to play in breeding such paradoxical results.

In this chapter the author attempts to describe in greater detail, the specific issues affecting learning in the foreign language classroom, and which have contributed to the above conflicting scenario. These issues are presented here under five general categories: The Inert Knowledge Problem, Reductionist Approaches, The Concept of Success, The Hierarchical Structure of the Classroom, and The Lack of an Immediate Application in EFL settings.

The Inert Knowledge Problem

The Inert Knowledge Problem is the result of a misalignment between the conditions of learning in the classroom with the conditions of use out in the real world, taxing students' ability to transfer their formally acquired knowledge of the language to situations of use outside. Indeed,

"what use is knowledge that students don't know how to use?" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, 28th SPELT Conference). There seems to be four principal causes for this problem: an excessive focus on usage, the Present-Practice-Use (PPU) paradigm, the adherence to an idealized native speaker standard, and finally the downplaying of output as serving no useful role in SLA.

The first issue, a focus on usage, alludes to the principle that language acquisition equates to the acquisition of a new system, mainly by following formal classroom routines in which students attempt to memorize the rules and structures underlying the basic sentences of that system. Ultimately, though, this process leads to what is known as 'declarative knowledge' of the language rather than the interaction-based procedural one. In other words, learners come out of a language course knowing how to talk 'about' language rather than knowing 'how to' use it effectively in real life situations. Although students are able to produce grammatical utterances most of the time from such declarative knowledge, it is not without a great deal of hesitation, reformulations, and a lack of touch for the social norms and expectations involved in every speech event.

Next, the PPU paradigm is easily a classic in the language teaching profession, which teachers often turn to for reasons such as facilitating the explanation of a difficult concept, cutting down the work on lesson planning, or to ensure that a lesson is 'taught' when all else seems to have failed. The question is, while this approach seems quite convenient from a 'teaching' perspective, no assurances can be provided as to whether actual 'learning' has taken place. Regardless, the PPU lesson format is still commonplace in ELT due to the relationship it has with traditional ideals of schooling, "which can be traced back to the colonial mission of spreading Enlightenment values for civilizing purposes" (Canagarajah, 1999, p.12).

Indeed, the perceived role of a teacher as the purveyor of knowledge can still be felt to this day in many classrooms worldwide. In fact, it might be said that teachers generally feel at their most confident when they are able to focus on nothing but 'transferring knowledge'. Such teacher-centered lesson is far easier to plan and follow than the constructivist type, with collaborative and personalized activities geared at promoting inductive learning of language as communication.

Additionally, such framework presupposes a prescriptive curriculum along with the idea that there is an order of acquisition, a nativist perspective which is not taken up by an ecological approach. Along these lines, van Lier (2000) notes: "in terms of learning, language emerges out of semiotic activity" (p.252), therefore "...acquisition and use are inseparable (Markee & Kasper, 2004, p.496), since it is in and through interaction that a language is learned: acquisition happens through use" (Kunitz, 2013, p.14). Thus, learners do not need to have language formally presented to them, rather they are led to gradually acquire the ability to deal with the language being used around them and focus on only what is relevant to their current needs.

It is curious to notice here, though, another ongoing thread as we move further into an understanding of the paradox of instructed language learning, which is that of *convenience*, only this time it is from the perspective of the teachers themselves, as they resort to PPU-based lessons even if the method locally adopted does not favor such lesson format. Also, earlier in this paper we discussed how convenience has been sought by schools, such as when they standardize methods and classroom procedures, elect to teach only the 'usage' portion of language, or equate learning success with attaining the knowledge of an idealized educated native speaker. Clearly, the idea of *convenience* represents an underlying force that seems to have had a role in causing

the paradox of instructed language learning, operating in the background of the pedagogical decisions made by schools and teachers.

The next issue, the idealized native speaker standard, can be tied to an underlying premise of schooling, that is, to unify thinking and to reproduce a dominant discourse. This idea of *conformity*, however, is shifted to the more ecological concept of *alignment* (see Kramsch, 2002, p.5). This, in turn, marks a departure from the long-standing monolingual orientation in ELT to the recognition of what Cook (2008) has termed *multi-competence*, that is, "the knowledge of two languages in the same mind". According to him, "the lack of this concept has meant SLA research has still treated the two languages separately rather than as different facets of the same person" (p.15).

In the sequence, there is the issue regarding the role output plays in the process of acquiring a second language. Owing in large part to the influential work of Krashen (1982) with his 'input hypothesis', output has been ascribed but a peripheral role in SLA, if ever as a way to provide more input to the learner. In fact, Krashen is categorical as he claims that "language acquisition occurs in only one way: by understanding messages" (p.1). Contradicting the foregoing statement, though, Swain (1995) maintains that not only does Output have a central role to play in the acquisition of a language, but it is a precondition for developing accuracy in it. Indeed, Swain's 'output hypothesis' identifies three functions of output: "The 'noticing/triggering' function, or what might be referred to as its consciousness-raising role; the hypothesis-testing function; [and] the metalinguistic function, or what might be referred to as its 'reflective' role" (p. 128).

Restoring output to a central focus in second language education has direct implications for the classroom, ranging from the simple increase of student talking time in the L2 to strategies for students to monitor their own speech. For instance, the notion of *output stretching*, which involves forcing production beyond the noticing of a gap in the learner's knowledge of the L2, will encourage learners to capitalize on natural strategies of real life communication, such as paraphrases, roundabout language, or even pidginization when faced with more demanding communicative situations.

Reductionist Approaches

In the process of language commodification, the use of reductionist approaches in language teaching practice has been perceived as a way of facilitating the compartmentalization and sequencing of language into a linear syllabus of growing grammar complexity, as well as a way of simplifying the well-balanced division of the four skills into the curriculum. As to the latter, though, it must be noted that skills work has been mostly exploited as a means to exemplifying the central grammatical focus in a unit, which contrasts to the real-life demands for each of these skills. Nevertheless, such systematic presentation of language is seen to cater for the need most people have to approach any type of learning in a *step-by-step* fashion, which affords students the safety and confidence from being able to *keep up* with the class.

Sure enough, the impression one has by contemplating such a well organized and structured course is the assurance that learning is within reach, if one can dispose of the effort to be equally organized and disciplined. Yet, this is far from a *win-win* situation for students, as the

above simplification entails an approach of language that does not reflect the true nature of language as compared to day-to-day interactions. After all, reductionist approaches significantly adulterate the nature of language so that commodification principles can be upheld, such as making language courses more *saleable*, though not more *learnable*.

On the other hand, "an ecological approach to language learning [...] shifts the emphasis from scientific reductionism to the notion of emergence" (van Lier, 2000, p.246). That is, rather than breaking language down into what is believed to be its *building blocks*, and proceed to acquire them in an additive fashion, it looks to the totality of language in its environment of occurrence, for the whole cannot be explained by studying its parts, as van Lier (2000) states: "At every level of development properties emerge that cannot be reduced to those of prior levels" (p.246). Also, "the new system is on a different scale, and has different meanings and patterns of functioning than the simpler ingredients had from which it emerged" (van Lier, 2004, Ch.1:23).

There seems to be three main signs of reductionism in most EFL language courses: The often unspoken Teaching To Tests (TTT) rule, the presentation of decontextualized and contrived language in the textbook, and the emphasis on a machine-like sender-receiver model for verbal communication.

Beginning with the TTT framework, its negative impact on the learning experience is especially felt in the shift from *quality* to *standards*. Van Lier (2004) asserts that quality is not the same as standards, for high standards entail tougher tests, whereas quality of learning is largely perceived in such practices as the promotion of extra-curricular activities, or in the simple pursuit of the art of learning for the sake of the evolution of one's mind. True enough, if a teacher has to spend most of his class time making an effort to ensure students are prepared for upcoming tests,

then very little room is left for improving learning quality, or even fostering those learning opportunities *of a sowing kind* mentioned before.

Next, the use of contrived and decontextualized language, perhaps the most evident sign of reductionism in instructed language learning, has led to serious penalties on the authenticity and legitimacy of students' learning, which most often consists of the provision of situational dialogues that bear very little resemblance with the way people interact in real life. Not only is the language in these dialogues replaced for simpler, more formal, and less idiomatic discourse, but its prosodic and paralinguistic features are completely removed, along with false-starts, topic shifts, not to mention the rather elusive and cultural word-play.

Indeed, Scott Thornbury (2010) reminds us that such narrow approach to language studies limits the opportunities students have to interact with the linguistic environment, so that it can be effectively appropriated into their growing communicative competence: "a lesson that is focused almost exclusively on the teaching of an isolated grammar item (like the third conditional) is unlikely to supply abundant affordances" (*E is for ecology*, :2).

The sender-receiver model of communication, in its turn, restricts the understanding of messages to an exclusive and direct analysis of the code, that is, by favoring the 'how' of communication at the expense of the 'what'. Such reductionist interpretation of real life communication neglects the influence that non-verbal communication has on interaction, which is consistently used by speakers during most routinely social encounters as *small talk* or *shop transactions*. In these situations, the focus is for the most part directed to the expected actions taken by interlocutors, the roles they play in the institutionalized event, and to paralinguistic features of conversation such as a speaker's tone of voice or body language.

These features, among others, function as tools to establish mutuality in social interaction, thus contributing to the whole efficiency of communication by complementing language with other semiotic means afforded by the immediate interaction. To be sure, the creative combinations of all these verbal and non-verbal resources are what ultimately makes intersubjectivity possible, i.e. "[the ability for] separate individuals to know or act within a common world" (Duranti and Goodwin 1992:27).

Intersubjectivity, as described above, does not yet refer to the interactional level under which language is made the most useful, and indeed more of a requirement. Peirce (1867) has linked this *low-language-dependent* level to his category of 'Secondness', where mutual relations are forged and reinforced by interlocutors. Yet, it is not until 'Thirdness', when communication acquires a real need for language, as interaction assumes a more predicational character, thus moving the focus towards the interpretations and representations of a common object.

At this point, it is not enough to simply rely on contextual clues or the ability of speakers to infer from each other's actions (Secondness), nor on the individual's own passive perceptions of the environment (Firstness). The emphasis is now on talk 'about the actions' or 'about things not present' in the immediate social context, which shifts the attention to the 'how' of communication, or in other words, the language employed. In fact, it is at this stage that miscommunications tend to happen the most, since it is here where all the features of language, especially its form-meaning-use triad requires greater attention by speakers.

Traditional methods tend to constantly force student interaction into a predicational (Thirdness) mode, so that language is always produced and, thus, made possible to be analyzed by the teacher. However, by depriving learners from the use of indexical resources such as

pointing (Secondness), as when information is mutually hidden during a pair-work info-gap activity, as well as neglecting how students perceive presented material from their point of view (Firstness), teachers may well be straining the normal processes of social interaction as well as L2 identity formation from a rush to get into language.

The preceding discussion serves to remind us about the essential role the social context plays in dictating language use, as van Lier (2004) clarifies: "discourse, definable as language use in context, therefore is not communicating something from A to B in a sender-receiver sort of way, but it is situated activity" (Ch.5:6). Situated activity, in turn, involves all the three levels above, thus placing a premium on the affordances of the communicative environment to determine social action, rather than on the linguistic input that is received from a conversation partner.

The Concept of Success

The issue regarding the Concept of Success in instructed language learning can be directly linked to the establishment of a yardstick for language development based on the idealized concept of an educated native speaker. The main side-effect of such homogeneity pretensions, is the association of *interlanguage* with any performance which does not yet stand as 'equivalent' to that of a native speaker. Although at face value it may seem like an innocuous term, after all it simply evokes the idea of standing 'in-between' the two extremes of knowledge acquisition, namely layperson knowledge and insider's knowledge, this is not how it tends to be ultimately perceived by the learner.

Beneath the technical jargon lies the pernicious ideologies of 'one right answer', or 'a fixed end-point for all', which breeds in turn such detrimental notions for the learner as *faulty language*, *linguistic imperfections*, *anomalous usage*, or in sum, *errors*. A typical corollary to these notions is the commonly observed unproductive student behavior I will call here '*error-phobia*', which significantly curbs their participation in the opportunities for learning in class. Despite these assumptions, the equalization of success to monolingual standards, along with the view of the L2 learner as an ever deficient speaker, still persists in most EFL schools, as it satisfies a commonplace desire to 'sound like a native speaker'. This, in turn, feeds into the ideals of language commodification, a central inquiry in this paper, by aiming to develop a product that is in high demand.

An ecological approach to language learning, on the other hand, refutes any view that there is a monolithic set of competencies to be acquired uniformly by all, rather advocating for diverse and personally useful learning outcomes for every individual. By diverse outcomes, though, I do not presume to claim that one is necessarily better or worse than the next one, but simply to acknowledge the role each learner has in defining his own goals for learning another language, based on his specific linguistic needs and preferences. After all, "the metaphor of a yardstick suggests a linearity to the SLA process, which does not characterize L2 learning" (Larsen-Freeman, 2014, p.9).

Overall, the (mis-)conception of success is responsible for at least three key issues in the classroom, namely the 'overemphasis on flawless performance', 'the educated native-speaker yardstick', briefly presented above, and the 'first language (L1) ban in the classroom'. Indeed, the first issue can be seen as the mirror reflection of 'error-phobia', which as pointed out above

contributes to the development of unproductive learning habits and strategies. This behavior, in turn, can be seen as being fostered by teachers' own actions in class, as when they excessively praise right answers, carry out frequent on-the-spot correction, or red-pen written work. In all these situations, the teacher may be concurrently sending the message that errors are to be avoided.

In arguing for a departure from the monolingual standard in second language learning, Canagarajah (1999) makes the following statement:

A debilitating monolingual/monocultural bias has revealed itself in the insistence on 'standard' English as the norm, the refusal to grant an active role to the students' first language in the learning and acquisition of English, ... [ignoring] the creative processes of linguistic mediation, interaction, and fusion that take place in social life. (p.3)

This quote naturally leads to the third, and last, issue under our discussion of students' conception of success in language learning, namely the L1-ban in language classrooms. As noted above, the L1 should be ascribed an *active role* in the learning and acquisition of English, which can be linked to the fact that learners come to the L2 classroom as fully socialized speakers in another language, within which are all their life experiences and social identities.

The fact that language and identity are inextricably linked and mutually-informing is supported by Kramsch (2008): "language is not just a mode of communication but a symbolic statement of social and cultural identity" (p.20). Therefore, it is only prudent that, whenever learning a new language, all the previous languages that have gone into the constitution of the

individual be appropriately tapped. Conversely, by banning L1 in class the teacher neglects all such prior linguistic experiences, and instead contemplates these learners as if they were ignorants of the ways one relates to the world and others.

Teachers and scholars who oppose to the use of L1 in class, usually do so by invoking the classic argument of *fossilization*, which states that negative transfer from the L1's linguistic system into the L2, if not corrected in time, can cause the resulting ungrammatical forms to become irreversible, or in other words, *fossilized*. However, as Larsen-Freeman (2014) points out, learners will invariably transfer some aspects/structures of their L1 into their use of an L2, which for some reason remains impervious to any amount of instruction and/or corrective feedback. Therefore, it seems of very little use to attempt to avoid such fate in learners' linguistic development, much less to do so by banning L1 use in class.

At last, an ecological approach requires that the current performance-based view of success be augmented with the idea of 'dynamic assessment', that is, the analysis of students' potential for future learning as opposed to the retrospective focus of traditional forms of assessment. More specifically, it refers to students' ability to effectively utilize instruction directed at them to bolster their learning experience. Success, thus, would be determined by a learner's "responsiveness to mediation. This means that what an individual is capable of with assistance at one point in time, he or she will be able to do without assistance at a future point in time" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2007, p.214).

The Hierarchical Structure of the Classroom

It is customary to contemplate a classroom as neatly arranged rows of desks, sitting anywhere around 20 to 50 or more students, all facing a large chalkboard where knowledge is presented as absolute truths, by the one and only individual charged with the task of transmitting such knowledge. Despite the contrivance which emanates from such scenario, it is still the standard found in many schools across the world. Nonetheless, as behaviorist models gave way to the collaborative ideals of constructivism, the classroom layout has undergone quite a few changes over the years, as noticed in the significant reduction of group size as well as in the introduction of the semi-circle seating arrangement.

Still, the teacher continues to hold a position of authority, as well as the status as the purveyor of knowledge in most classrooms, dictating direction and focus, demanding discipline, managing who holds the floor in conversations, and ruling right from wrong. Again, language commodification interests resurface in these situations, especially as these relate to standardization, or to the adoption of expected roles in the classroom, and avoiding behavior that would seem to contradict the established ideals. Canagarajah (1999) seems to reveal a similar concern to the foregoing circumstances:

The other features of Mrs K.'s classroom practice — such as learning to orientate to the lesson by ignoring the distractions outside the classroom, obeying the teacher, ... also have ideological implications. They can influence Rajan to undertake alienating mechanical labor while suppressing other expressive and spiritual concerns, accept

hierarchical social arrangements, accommodate the demands of authority figures, and prioritize self-interest. (p.22-23)

This brings us back to our quest for reconciling the conditions of learning with the conditions of use, a central issue in attempting to redress the larger paradox of instructed language learning. In naturally-occurring interaction, speakers must learn the strategies of conversation turn-taking as well as attend to mutually agreed norms of conduct, make choices of register based on the immediate social conventions, and conduct repair in the face of miscommunication. In other words, however much we may wish to ascribe logic and control to conversation, it is hard to deny its unpredictable nature in real life interaction, which is affected by the perceived roles of interlocutors, and contingent upon the affordances of the social environment. Therefore, a more ideal classroom organizational framework would ideally need to grant students greater agency and participation in lesson activities, as well as take steps towards a democratization of knowledge, recognizing its ephemeral nature in society as it is negotiated anew in every interaction.

Larsen-Freeman (2014) provides us with a way of implementing such ideal classroom format: "Rather than thinking of providing students with input, then, teachers should think of activities which provide students with multiple entry points", or to put it in more ecological terms, we should "engage learners in activities that are rich in affordances" (p.15). This way, students are empowered to take action in class, which means more language will be produced and noticed by students as well as more input will be generated, and learning will proceed in the same way as in real life contexts, that is, *through use*. As for the democratization of knowledge,

it is helpful to move from dichotomies such as right vs. wrong to an idea of multiple perspectives, as argued by Leather and van Dam (2002) in the following quote:

Some elements of the language situation may better be seen as gradient rather than categorical: speaker-hearer roles may not always be distinct; 'correctness' and appropriateness are often a matter of degree; language varieties merge and overlap; understanding and interpretation are often a matter of approximation. (p.13)

The Lack of an Immediate Application in EFL settings

First of all, foreign language learning is perhaps the only type of course whose target knowledge cannot be fully deployed or *put to the test* in the same location where it is learned. For that to happen, the learner must leave his national territory and either meet with speakers of other languages who share the learner's L2, or indeed go after actual native speakers of that language. It might seem like an obvious observation to make, however if one looks closer at how EFL teaching is carried out nowadays, it will become clear that most practices tend to operate as if this were not the case. For instance, the L1-ban in the classroom or sometimes even outside while in the school premises, the insistence on perfect pronunciation and/or more idiomatic choices of discourse, but perhaps especially from the common demand teachers make for students to *think in the L2*.

Next, there is the lack of a community of practice, which would go a long way in remedying the above situation and granting meaning and purpose to the endeavor of taking up a

foreign language. The challenge for the establishment of a community of practice *outside* school, though, is one of a socio-cultural nature, as it often leads to a series of embarrassments such as when performing in public, especially in monocultural urban centers, or from the common face-threatening situation of making mistakes. Nevertheless, a greater challenge may still lie just below all these more readily identifiable issues, which is the general awkwardness of not knowing how to behave or what to say in such encounters.

These speaking practice situations are not recognized as legitimate social encounters, such as *friends catching up*, *banter talk*, *business meetings*, etc. On the contrary, it is usually interpreted as an assignment, which is why one would feel so discouraged at the thought of leaving one's house to attend an English-speaking meeting, where their imperfections will be exacerbated, and no teacher will be around to provide appropriate feedback or ensure no single student becomes the dominant and *show-off* speaker.

However, the biggest challenge is not so much in the artificial undertaking of using the L2 within an L1 dominant context, but rather to reverse the misconception that for one to learn an L2 one needs to shift the focus away from the L1. This seems to derive from the belief in the concept of *hybridity*, which Larsen-Freeman (2014) explains as the assumption that speakers of two or more languages are always aware of these languages as completely separate and discrete entities which one can switch to and fro at will. In fact, it is commonly thought that "...the learner's system and the idealized system will never converge" (p.8).

Contradicting the above, though, Cook (2008) argues that since "these languages coexist in the same mind; [that is,] one person knows both", it is thus necessary to view all the languages known by an individual as a whole integrated knowledge, which Cook has termed 'multi-

competence' (p.14). Adding further to this realization, "Makoni and Makoni's [own] term 'vague linguistique' acknowledges that speakers have access to diverse linguistic resources and use them in unpredictable ways [...] using bits and pieces of language" (cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2014, p. 8).

Therefore, to simply encourage EFL learners to use English outside school, without preparing them to deal effectively with the inevitable situations of L1 interference and translation, as well as explaining the role it plays for multilingual speakers, learners may be led to think their mother tongue has no role during L2 practice. As a result, learners are led to operate against the nature of their growing multi-competence, which not only increases the already challenging task of learning a second language but it reinforces the unhelpful idealization of a native speaker standard. According to Cook (2008), "the danger of concentrating on the native speaker is that the specific characteristics of L2 users are ignored. L2 users can do things that monolingual native speakers cannot" (p.15).

This chapter has outlined the main issues leading to today's perceived paradox of instructed language learning. Overall, their main causes can be readily associated to common activities and techniques which have been around in second and foreign language teaching for quite some time. In the next chapter, the author presents a few essential mindset changes from an ecological perspective which can guide the teacher in addressing these issues, based on informed decisions considering the particularities and constraints of his own context of practice.

Chapter 3: A Case for an Ecological Approach

The field of Second Language Acquisition has always been in constant strife for a theory of language and learning that can account for all cases and gain unanimous support, yet time and again a new theory emerges only to be debunked or refuted by the next one. Over three decades ago, Stephen Krashen (1982) would unveil his groundbreaking Natural Approach, which along with a set of new hypotheses foregrounded a revolutionary change in the way teachers and researchers approached the teaching and learning of a second language. Indeed, it might be said that back then, concerns regarding a misalignment between the conditions of learning and use were already being raised, albeit indirectly, from the powerful claims made by Krashen in his Acquisition-Learning hypothesis.

According to this theory there are two independent systems of language performance: *the acquired system* and *the learned system*. The former derives from a subconscious process that takes place during natural communication, whereas the latter is the product of formal instruction. It seems reasonable to equate the *acquired system* to the type of knowledge a speaker would need to communicate, elsewhere known as *procedural knowledge*, because it allows the *knower* to 'do things with the language'. In contrast, the *learned system* seems to account for the abstract linguistic rules underlying the *acquired system*, commonly referred to as *declarative knowledge*, or to put it simply, 'language to talk about language'.

Furthermore, according to Krashen, *learning* can hardly become *acquisition*, regardless of the amount of instruction or practice, as Schutz (2014) explains on Krashen's Brazilian website: "Even if some partial knowledge of the functioning of the language is reached, it is not

easily transformed into communication skills" (*Interrelationship between acquisition and learning and its implications*, :3).

In any case, despite the fact that Krashen's views of SLA managed to demystify quite a few long-standing misconceptions in the field up to that point, they were essentially cognitivist in nature, or in other words, exclusively concerned with what happens 'in the head' at the expense of the role that social interaction plays in the whole linguistic formation of an individual. It does seem quite unlikely to expect that the aforementioned *procedural knowledge* be acquired if one is never involved in the 'procedures', and indeed the 'proceedings', of language use during the learning process.

An ecological approach, on the other hand, expects learning to take place in the opposite direction, that is, "first on the social plane and only later [being] internalized on the psychological plane in the form of inner speech in interaction with more capable peers" (Kramsch, 2008, p.21). After all, as van Lier (2004) states: "mind and consciousness develop as a result of social activity in the world, and learning consists of achieving more complex, more effective ('better' would of course be rather loaded terminology) activity in the world" (Ch.1:74).

A caveat here seems in order, though, since an ecological approach chooses to avoid the term *acquisition*, which alludes to the view of language as a unifying and fixed object out there that can be studied, manipulated, and indeed *acquired* by individuals, and proposes in its place the concept of 'participation'. According to Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), the participation metaphor "...obliges us to think of learning as a process of becoming a member of a certain

community, which entails the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms" (p.155).

From this perspective, language learning is different for different learners, as it is contingent on the ever changing social environment, with all its opportunities and inhibitions for action, affecting as well as being affected by the use of language. In fact, van Lier (2004) claims that language is "...like culture, [that is,] it is contested, open to processes of inclusion and exclusion, prescribed and proscribed patterns of use, permeated by value judgments, markers of identity, and signs of success" (Ch.1:32). Such claims surely have serious implications for how one conceives of language acquisition, at times complementing while at others fully contradicting much of the current cognitivist and behaviorist thinking. Therefore, it can be said that learning does not happen in the following ways:

- 1) Language does not just 'grow' with minimal triggering from the environment – the UG [Universal Grammar] perspective;
- 2) Language does not have to be learned rule by rule, by dint of instruction and practice – the traditional grammar perspective;
- 3) Language is not just imitation and association based on observed examples – the traditional behavioristic perspective. (Ch.4:31)

In other words, it is highly unlikely that we can ever achieve a unanimously agreed upon theory of language and learning by invoking any one single perspective or explanation to such a complex phenomenon that is the learning of languages. The same holds true for thinking that is based on the establishment of dichotomies. Aware of that, an ecological approach is offered not

as a mutually exclusive alternative, but rather as a complementing perspective which avoids the traditional discriminatory either-or mindset.

As a first step towards an ecological way of thinking, though, it is paramount that one first understand its core concept of *emergence*, which according to van Lier (2004) "...happens when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher-order system" (Ch.1:25). This assumption necessarily contradicts the old *building blocks* metaphor, which defines the learning process as a progressive and cumulative acquisition of a language's rules and vocabulary. In fact, for emergence to take place learners need to "be engaged in activity and have information around that is available to be picked up and used" (Ch.4:112). Such engagement, van Lier adds, is best seen as 'active perception' or 'perception-in-action' (Ch.4:105), which, in turn, can be achieved through *attention* that is geared at "...getting information from the environment while doing something, in order to do something else (Ch.4:113).

Another central question in the design of any theory of learning refers to how a language's grammar is expected to be acquired, as well as how it can be realized in the language classroom. Under an emergent notion of language learning, this process is often called *grammaticalization* (Dittmar, 1992), but it has also been referred to as *grammaticization* (Rutherford, 1987) and, more recently, *grammaring* (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). They all agree in one point, though, that the acquisition of grammar occurs "not as a result of an accumulation of explicitly learned rules, but rather as the result of cognitive and/or social activity using the language in meaningful ways" (van Lier, 2004, Ch.4:51).

In contrast to former ways of understanding grammar acquisition, which tended to emphasize 'input' as the crucial contributing factor, most notably Krashen's comprehensible input

theory (1985), the concept of *grammaticalization* attributes equal importance to the role of output. Indeed, Rutherford (1987) advocates for an approach to grammar he calls *consciousness-raising*, which requires that learners be constantly attentive to their own language production, examining their linguistic choices and thus constructing their own developing grammar. That is, the focus is on analyzing the "actual metamorphosis of interlanguage" (1987, p.38), which cannot be accomplished if one is only concerned with whether input is comprehensible and accessible.

Lending support to the above, van Lier (2004) is more to the point in explaining how such ecological view of grammar teaching might be realized in the classroom:

What needs to happen is a very systematic approach to teaching grammar explicitly, but not by way of explanations or accumulated entities (a succession of drills), but by raising the learners' awareness of what they are trying to say and how they are saying it, and coming up with more efficacious ways of saying that thing. (Ch.4:56)

Another key concept to be understood is that of learner's voice, which refers to the ability to use the target language in ways that are personally authentic, and which contributes to the development of an L2 identity. This can be linked to the notion of language 'Firstness', in Peircian terminology, which van Lier (2004) has defined as: "a relation of emotional mutuality with the language" (Ch.3:83), and which is born out of an ongoing engagement with language during natural and meaningful conversation. The acquisition of the learner's voice is analogous to

Bourdieu's (1990) *feel for the game*, that is, a fluent and intuitive predisposition for action within a certain social environment achieved through constant and reflexive practice.

Be that as it may, van Lier (2004) remarks that: "a learner speaks in his or her own voice when three conditions hold: awareness of language and learning, autonomy and self-determination in language use and learning processes, and authenticity in acts of speaking" (Ch. 5:76). Sure enough, one will often hear such issues being raised in conversations about good learning habits or expected student behavior in class, though whether these end up being implemented in the classroom, it is hard to tell. In fact, the aspect of *authenticity in acts of speaking* may very well be the most neglected of all, for as van Lier argues, students are often "denied systematic opportunities to speak for [them]selves" (Ch.3:83).

A third and final topic in understanding the changes proposed by an ecological approach, regards how assessment is done. As has been shown before, an ecological approach proposes the 'participation metaphor' as a more viable alternative to the 'acquisition metaphor', which naturally demands an assessment focus that prioritize language use. Another corollary of such a shift regards the unit of analysis, which would now move from language choices to "the active learner, or the activity itself" (van Lier, 2000, p.253). Finally, traditional grammar-based discrete-point tests would necessarily have to be replaced by performance tests, which aim to assess students' ability to accomplish a communicative task regardless of the linguistic means employed.

In essence, an ecological approach calls for more of a change of mindset rather than one of method, which complements the assumption that language learning happens only *in the head* with the notion of *emergence*, and how that depends on the learner's close interaction with the social environment. Indeed, it calls for viewing language as ways to better relate to the world and

others, and whose meaning potential is a function of negotiated stances, projected intentions, hidden agendas, and socially expected behavior. In sum, to contemplate language in use is at once to take a sociocultural and historical perspective on the very act of communication, as it influences how interpretations are made about the intentions expressed by every participant.

This chapter has, then, focused on shifting teachers' underlying 'thinking' about language and learning in light of an ecological approach, as opposed to 'providing a *list of ingredients*', or techniques, which could be used to execute the ideal *recipe* for a successful lesson. Such *one-way road to success* type of methods seems rather more like an utopia, an artifice created by many schools to gain the attention of students. Language learning, as this paper has hopefully been able to show by now, is far too complex to be understood solely from an objective and linear stance or interpretation.

Thus, the attempt here has been instead to instill the main principles which can direct teachers towards making sensible adaptations based on their students' immediate needs, and as far as local pedagogical norms would permit. Ultimately, though, the goal is to stimulate healthy debates in schools, bringing teachers, administrators, and students together in an ongoing dialogue with a view to fostering a '*think-outside-the-box*' mentality. Regardless of the perspective one ends up adhering to, whether this is ecological or otherwise, it seems like a more pressing objective to ensure that the channel remains open between all the involved participants in someone's education, so that changes for the better will always have a place in every school.

In the next chapter, the author discusses some more concrete classroom-gearred strategies the teacher can adopt to begin the move towards an ecological approach.

Chapter 4: Implications for the EFL Classroom

This final chapter presents some concrete implications an ecological approach has for the classroom, and which can guide teachers into making an initial transition into more ecological practices of second language education. Of course, these are simply suggestions, and as such they do not guarantee success by slavishly replicating them into your own classroom. Therefore, careful consideration of their implications regarding your local sociocultural norms and educational standards should be observed in advance, and only then proceed to make the appropriate adaptations.

First of all, it is hard to conceive of an ecological classroom where students are treated only like *learners*, that is, as ever *deficient* and *error-prone* individuals who have nothing new or clever to offer and contribute to the class. In fact, Cook (2008) proposes the more ecological term 'L2 users', which he defines as individuals who "[use] the second language for real-life purposes", as opposed to 'L2 learners', that is, individuals "acquiring a second language rather than using it" (p.11).

The implications for this shift are expected to be felt more in terms of how error correction is normally handled by the teacher. In essence, though, it means avoiding the often debilitating 'on-the-spot correction', since students' confidence towards language use in class ends up being sacrificed for the sake of linguistic feedback. Besides, L2 users are *multi-competent* by nature, which means they will inevitably carry features of all their competing languages over to one another. Rather than a nuisance, then, such linguistic behavior should be seen as a normal feature of the unique communicative capabilities possessed by such individuals.

Along these lines, on top of honoring students' *multi-competence*, it is necessary to welcome students' *whole-persons* into every lesson. In other words, teachers are advised to capitalize on all that students bring into the learning environment from their lives outside, such as experiences, values, and idiosyncrasies. The goal here is to foster a more inclusive classroom, while attending to students' affective needs, which are decisive in any learning situation, especially as they dictate what gets learned and what is ignored.

It seems important at this point in the discussion to invoke the topic of *motivation*, since the propositions made so far can all be seen to directly influence students' motivational levels. Indeed, motivation is perhaps one of the most debatable and controversial topics in ELT, especially as it directly affects how students ultimately respond to instruction. Much of these discussions, though, tend to focus on identifying students' reasons for starting a language course, and later categorize results under either intrinsic or extrinsic types of motivation.

These, in turn, respectively derive from either a personal predisposition to learn another language, or from the motivation of external rewards afforded by such knowledge, such as career advancement. No matter how well these assessments are carried out, though, the results tend to be information for its own sake, since one can scarcely think of ways to transform extrinsically motivated students into intrinsic types.

Therefore, the focus needs to be shifted from *changing students to changing the learning environment*, where students come together not just for learning a language, but also for the joy of meeting like-minded classmates and teachers who have something of worth to offer them. Welcoming students' whole-person, then, means letting them take charge of their learning, promoting not only the agency of helping direct the course of a lesson but also encouraging

students to have the authorship of their actions. In supporting such inclusive learning environment, though, questions of right vs. wrong must be suspended until a more appropriate moment in the lesson. This last requirement is bound to be quite challenging in most cases, since one can hardly manage to resist indeterminately the urge of projecting one's own opinion in the face of disagreement, as illustrated in this passage by Levoy (1997):

It takes tremendous courage and hard work... not to take sides when we experience conflict but to stretch the soul wide enough to encompass both sides, stretch the imagination almost to the bursting point and understand that two utterly contrary stories can coexist even within the same person. (p.58)

Furthermore, *codeswitching*, where the different languages known by the learner are mixed in speech, at times even within the same sentence should be allowed if one is to take Cook's (1998) notion of *multi-competence* seriously. According to him, "bilingual codeswitching is neither unusual nor abnormal; it is an ordinary fact of life in many multilingual societies" (p. 174). This affirmation, in turn, presents a further case against the L1-ban discussed in chapter 2, especially as a learner's L1 along with all his L2s are now recognized as belonging to one indissociable knowledge in the learner's mind, and as a result should be allowed to function as such.

Kramersch (2002) further lends support to this integrated knowledge of the languages known by an individual when she talks about an individual's *idiolect*, which she describes as: "the whole language of the experience of the person, including the ability to translate from one

language to another". Later, she adds that: "an idiolect is a system far from equilibrium, because it carries with it traces of past experiences and their emotional resonances that have gone into the constitution of the speaker as a subject" (p.20). Therefore, it is not only unrealistic to require that students comply with a monolingual L2 standard in class, but indeed it is not prudent to deprive them from access to the whole of their *idiolect* or *multi-competence*, which is inextricably linked to their social-historical identities.

In fact, Kramsch (2007) has introduced the notion of 'Symbolic Competence', that is, the ability to "operate between languages" (MLA, 2007). As she notes, such an ability "will not be so much a matter of bringing [an individual's] message across accurately and appropriately than it is of creating affordances" (p.403), or in van Lier's (2004) own words: "[by creating] relationships of possibility" (:105). Furthermore, Kramsch affirms that adopting such a view of competence does not entail a radical change in pedagogies: "symbolic competence is not yet another skill that language learners need to master, nor is it yet another theory of language acquisition. It is a variationist frame of mind adapted to our post-modern times" (p.403).

In sum, an ecological approach implies a shift from viewing students as deficient learners to the whole persons they are, bringing unique cultural and historical experiences into the class, as well as multiple languages to be used in the service of more personally-enriching interactions. The simple fact of teachers beginning to contemplate students this way will naturally open their eyes to the new possibilities and learning potentials which such a view can afford, and indeed bask into the joy that is true collaborative learning.

The outcome of the above reflects the ideas of what has been called 'situated learning', for students are not only 'learners in a classroom', but individuals who will always be situated

within a sociocultural, political, and historical milieu. Indeed, people do not leave their lives behind upon joining a language class. Rather, they just choose to take part in one more 'community of practice', with its own specific norms and discourse, the same way it is with their work or friends' communities. Language learning this way is simply another life event, where not all questions need to be answered precisely, where the learning process is worth more than its tangible products, and in which experiences are what everyone ultimately needs to carry beyond their courses.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to present a case for an ecological approach to teaching, in light of the current demand for an alternative which is capable of redressing the low-proficiency levels of English as a foreign language, as exhibited these days by many developing countries. This has been accomplished by considering the main issues leading up to such dismal results, and later identifying ecological solutions that could help address or mitigate these problems. At the center of these solutions, though, was the goal of resolving the perceived misalignment between the conditions of learning in class with the conditions of use outside.

The second main thrust of the present study involved demonstrating how the above misalignment may have had its roots in language commodification, a practice commonly associated with what has now become a conventional school-business partnership. The basic argument here revolved around the idea that by modifying pedagogies to accommodate commercialization goals, they have ceased to reflect the foundational principles which had made them conducive to learning in the first place. Such realization, then, has provided momentum for a resistance movement against this commodified ELT market, with a view to curbing its negative impact on learning outcomes.

With these objectives in mind, chapter one began by focusing on the usual criticism surrounding this market, namely its over-reliance on behaviorist and cognitivist approaches, as well as its vague promises of immediate results. Such traditional educational design has then been countered on the grounds that its proposed 'learning convenience' did not seem to outweigh the adverse effects it had on students' language development in the long term. Indeed, the

linguistic knowledge produced by this process was found to eventually become almost intransferrable to situations of use outside, or in more technical jargon, inert.

Following that, chapter two attempted to further elucidate the main issues stemming from language commodification efforts in EFL, as these have amounted to the observable instruction-learning mismatch that is thought to be responsible for the precarious educational model offered by many schools these days. Basically, it has been suggested that the excessive contrivances of today's classroom environments, along with the establishment of unrealistic expectations towards L2 performance have prevented students from becoming independent and effective second language users. In addition, an attempt was made to demystify the L1-use controversy in the L2 classroom, by invoking the concept of *multi-competence*, or the individual's integrated knowledge of multiple languages, which ultimately renders a ban on L1 pointless. After all, prohibiting students' 'verbal use' of a language does not impede them from performing 'mental translations'.

Given the above background on language commodification and its negative impact on foreign language teaching, the author goes on to make a case in chapter three for an ecological approach, which he sees as instrumental in restoring teaching effectiveness to ELT in the face of a 'business-biased school culture'. The justification for this shift has been expressed along the lines that an ecological approach is capable of reconciling the diverging agendas of school and business, while avoiding interfering too much with the pedagogical status quo. It does that by essentially advocating for a change of mindset, geared at equipping the teacher with the ability to devise classroom activities that are sensitive to the multiple influences that the sociocultural environment has on both the learners and the learning task.

At last, chapter four concludes by outlining some basic changes that it sees as preconditions for initiating the move towards a more ecological language classroom. Prominent among these was the shift from learner to user, that is, from the ever deficient speaker, prone to all sorts of errors, to a more autonomous individual with unique multilingual skills, and whose growing communicative ability should ideally prevail over the distance between his interlanguage and the target native speaker's competence. Another essential move presented in this chapter considered the idea of making classrooms more inclusive by welcoming students' whole persons into the learning experience, especially in terms of allowing for their experiences outside to have a place in the discussions and activities of a lesson.

Overall, the observations made in this paper have centered around countries where social inequalities and political corruption have been an ongoing source of concern. As a result, these sociopolitical realities need to be factored into the questions raised in this paper if one is to fully understand the ideas proposed here, and be able to appropriately carry them over into the demands and constraints of their own teaching contexts.

Also, it should be noted that an ecological approach is not meant here as a complete departure from more traditional methods of foreign language education, as the techniques commonly associated to the latter form the basis of a long-standing culture of schooling espoused by many students, and as such should not be simply dismissed. To be sure, the successful implementation of newer ecological perspectives to teaching rests on the teacher's dexterous ability to make pedagogical choices that are sensitive to the commonly held educational imperatives of structure, systematicity, accountability, and conformity to standards.

In truth, the ELT field would greatly benefit from more research done in the area where the progressive ideals of an ecological approach meet the largely cognitivist status quo of English language education in many developing countries. More specifically, pedagogical solutions are needed that place a premium on the social aspects of language learning, while keeping with the essentials of the long established schooling tradition.

All the same, any change, however big or small, is ultimately carried out by the hands of a teacher. Therefore, teachers have a crucial role to play in bringing about the ideals of an ecological approach by sensitizing school administrators as to the legitimacy of these practices to instructed language learning, as well as to their capacity of preparing learners to become effective multilingual speakers in a world whose borders are becoming increasingly blurred.

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