Learning to live with complexity: towards an ecological perspective on language teaching

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Abstract

The article surveys recent trends in language teaching thinking in terms of the distinction between the technological and ecological perspectives on teaching and learning. The ecological perspective on language teaching focuses attention on the subjective reality which various aspects of the teaching–learning process assume for participants, and on the dynamic interaction between methodology and context. It thus confronts us with the complex and multi-faceted nature of teaching and learning as they are actually lived out in specific settings. In this way, it makes it necessary to adopt a "local" approach to pedagogical decision making. Subsequent to a survey of the trends which have led to the emergence of the ecological perspective, the article focuses on the factors that need to be taken into account in the practical realisation of an ecological approach to language teaching. These include a re-evaluation of the relation between theory and practice, the development of a research agenda capable of accessing the complex human realities of teaching and learning, and a rethinking of the bases of pedagogical decision making.
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1. Introduction: acknowledging the complexity of language teaching

This article will survey a number of trends which are effecting a significant change in the manner in which we understand language teaching and evaluate the bases of

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pedagogical decision making. Specifically, these trends have focused our attention on the complexity of language teaching. In a sense, this might seem fairly unremarkable, as few practising teachers or other language educators would seriously question that language teaching is a complex activity—most indeed would view it as a statement of the obvious. There are, however, at least two reasons for welcoming a more explicit acknowledgement of the complexity of language teaching and learning. The first is that, although practising language teachers are well aware of the complexity of their task, the same cannot always be said for the other actors who, in one way or another, play a role in the endeavour of language education—political and educational authorities, the management or administration of teaching institutions, clients, sponsors, parents, and many others. Nevertheless, it is often within frameworks set up by these actors that teachers have to live out their tasks in the classroom. If only for this reason, then, there is a good justification for recalling the complex nature of language teaching. Secondly, and more fundamentally, there is the question whether the complexity of language teaching is something incidental—grit in the machine of pedagogical efficiency, or whether it is an inherent feature of the activity itself. In this article I will suggest that the latter is the case, and that acknowledging and working openly with this complexity is fundamental to any honest attempt to understand language teaching as it really is.

With this goal in mind, I will look at certain trends in thinking on language teaching over the last few decades in terms of the move from a technological to an ecological perspective on language teaching. Subsequently, attention will be given to the strategies involved in the practical realisation of an ecological approach to language teaching.

2. The development of a new technology of language teaching

People have been learning languages other than their first language throughout the long history of mankind, either informally or with the help of one methodological support or another (cf. Howatt, 1984). The period of time since the 1960s, however, has witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the organised provision of language teaching. This results from the dramatic increase in international exchanges and mobility which has characterised this period of history, and the consequent need for the learning of languages. Furthermore, this period has also witnessed a redefinition of the goals of language teaching, the emphasis coming to be placed on the development of communicative competences, i.e. learners' ability to do things in the language for purposes of study, commerce, travel, and so on. These changes clearly set a challenge for the language teaching profession, and the last few decades have witnessed an impressive expansion in reflection, experimentation and creativity in our field, as can be seen in work on needs analysis (cf. Munby, 1978; Richterich, 1973), on communicatively based approaches to course design (cf. Mackay and Mountford, 1978; Wilkins, 1976; Widdowson, 1978), as well as on the development of a new approach to classroom methodology (cf. Brumfit, 1984; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Savignon, 1983; Strevens, 1977). By the early 1980s, the theoretical landscape of language teaching had undergone a dramatic change. This intense

work of reflection and development has continued into the present and there is no reason to believe that it will stop in the near future.

The period since the 1960s has thus been marked by a considerable amount of creativity and energy in language teaching. This may be seen in the theoretical developments mentioned earlier, and also in an impressive productivity in terms of teaching materials and learning aids of many types, including the use of various technological facilities such as video, computer-assisted learning and multimedia. A parallel expansion has taken place in terms of the number of professional journals, language teaching associations, and courses in applied linguistics or language teaching methodology which are available. It would thus be legitimate to say that over the last few decades our profession has developed what could be seen as a new "technology" of language teaching.

These trends are positive in a number of ways: having a rich technology at one's disposal is certainly a help. Technology, however, offers a potential, but does not in itself guarantee that a given result will be obtained, not in a complex human activity like teaching, at least. The real effectiveness of educational technology depends not just on the inner logic and potentiality of the technology itself but rather on the appropriacy of its use, and this involves consideration of a variety of "soft" data relating to the perceptions and attitudes of the people who will be using it and of the context in which it will be used. This in turn calls for a different perspective on language teaching, one which is complementary to but nonetheless separate from the "technological" developments referred to earlier.

3. Towards an ecological perspective on language teaching

If it could be assumed that learners were "simply" learners, that teachers were "simply" teachers, and that one classroom was essentially the same as another, there would probably be little need for other than a technological approach to language teaching. Objective differences such as the age of learners, the specific goals being pursued, or class numbers, could be included in a pre-established matrix and accommodated in a reasonably straightforward manner as departures from a given norm—rather in the way that the same production machinery can be recalibrated to produce different cars. In this scenario, a well developed technology of language teaching would be sufficient to guarantee a fairly predictable set of results.

This, of course, is not the case. Learners are not "simply" learners any more than teachers are "simply" teachers; teaching contexts, too, differ from one another in a significant number of ways. In other words, language teaching is far more complex than producing cars: we cannot therefore assume that the technology of language teaching will lead in a neat, deterministic manner to a predictable set of learning outcomes. For the technology of language teaching to produce effective results, it has to work with people as they are in the context in which they find themselves at a given point in time. The technology, then, has to be used appropriately, and deciding on what is or is not appropriate calls for consideration of the total context of teaching in both human and pragmatic terms. Certain writers (Holliday and Cooke,

1982; Van Lier, 1997) have used the term "ecological" to describe this perspective on language teaching. An ecological perspective involves exploring language teaching and learning within the totality of the lives of the various participants involved, and not as one sub-part of their lives which can be examined in isolation.

In an ecological perspective on teaching and learning, educational technology is one element among others, an important element indeed, but still only one. Furthermore, it is unsafe to assume that the results of educational technology can be predicted confidently from the inner logic of this technology alone, as this logic will interact with the perceptions and goals of those who are involved in using it. This means that to understand what actually takes place in our classrooms, we have to look at these classrooms as entities in their own right and explore the meaning they have for those who are present within them in their own terms, and not with reference to a situation—external and supposedly universal set of assumptions. Understanding classroom teaching and learning therefore involves exploring the meaning these activities have for students, for teachers, and for the others who, in one way or another, influence what takes place in each classroom as a reality in its own right.

A number of trends have contributed to the emergence of the ecological perspective on language teaching and learning. One relates to the exploration of individual learners' interaction with the learning process and is closely linked to the concern with learner-centredness in language teaching. This trend encompasses a variety of different insights and currents of thought (Tudor, 1996). One of these relates to the work conducted from the 1970s into the learning-oriented strategies employed by language learners (cf. Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1991), and into individual differences and learning style preferences (Reid, 1995; Skehan, 1989; Williams and Burden, 1997; Willing, 1988). This research has highlighted just how wide a range of factors of a psychological, cognitive and experiential nature influence students' interaction with the learning process. The picture of the learning process which emerges is a very complex one which offers little support to belief in the existence of a single model of language learning.

A related line of research has sought to explore the role of sociocultural factors in students' interaction with language learning (e.g. Erbaugh, 1990; Melton, 1990; Oxford et al. 1992; Reid, 1987; Sullivan, 1996). It would be unhelpful to oversimplify the results of studies in this area, but they indicate that the socioculturally based traditions of learning to which students have been exposed exert a very real influence on how they perceive the teaching–learning process, how they define their goals, and how they interact with methodological choices. One evident implication of this line of research is the need to develop "appropriate" methodology (Holliday, 1994). This entails being sensitive to students' sociocultural identity (Susser, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Kubota, 1999) and to their socioculturally based expectations with respect to various aspects of the learning process (Ellis, 1996; Ho and Crookall, 1995; Riley, 1988).

Another line of research has taken these observations further by exploring the influence of more broadly sociocultural and ideological factors on language learning (Canagarajah, 1993, 1999; Coleman, 1996a; Pennycook, 1994, 1997; Phillipson, 1992). Specifically, these researchers have highlighted the role played in language

learning by the subjective meaning the target language itself has for students. The manner in which students perceive and interact with the language they are asked to study, as well as the way in which they are asked to study it, is influenced significantly by their sociocultural identity and, therefore, by their attitudes to the language in question and to the target language culture. In the world of post- and neo-colonialism, and in view of the role of English as the dominant medium of global capitalism, these considerations play a particular role in the teaching and learning of this language worldwide.

A smaller though growing body of research has yielded similar insights with respect to language teachers. Richards, for example, points to the importance of understanding teaching "from the inside", i.e. of the "need to listen to teachers' voices in understanding classroom practice" in order to be in a position to "understand teaching in its own terms and in ways in which it is understood by teachers" (1996: 281–282). Richards thus stresses the need to accord attention to the subjective realities of teaching from the point of view of the individual teacher. This involves exploring teacher attitudes and perceptions, and the way in which these influence teachers' classroom behaviours and decision making strategies (cf. Bailey et al., 1996; Freeman and Richards, 1993; Pennington, 1995, 1996; Woods, 1996). Attention has also been given to the influence of sociocultural factors on teachers' perceptions of their role and tasks (e.g. Burnaby and Sun, 1989; Langfeldt, 1992; Richards, 1992). This line of research has come to paint a picture of language teaching from the point of view of teachers which is no less complex than that which has emerged with respect to students. Teachers are no more "simply" teachers than students are "simply" students. Both are human beings whose involvement in the process of language study is shaped by a complex set of beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. Consequently, these many factors need to be taken into account in any sustainable approach to the development of teaching–learning programmes. In other words, in order to achieve meaningful results, the technology of language teaching needs to be used in the light of a wide range of human and contextual factors.

The technological and the ecological perspectives on language teaching need not, of course, be incompatible with one another. The technology of language teaching as seen in approach, methodology, materials and learning aids provides language educators with options from which they can choose in setting up a course or planning a class. The ecological perspective, on the other hand, focuses attention on the various human and contextual factors which influence the use and likely effectiveness of this technology. There can, however, be a tension between the two perspectives. A technological approach to education seems positive and confident, and promises a specific product. An ecological approach, on the other hand, often calls upon us to "Wait a moment" and has many "It depends". Perhaps for this reason, the technological perspective has the most attraction for those who are further removed from classroom realities—planning committees, educational authorities, and so on. Practising teachers, however, work in and are part of one little ecosystem which is the classroom, and it is much more difficult for them to ignore the "rules" or inner logic of this system and simply "apply the technology" according to the

instruction manual. The teacher's reality is thus an ecological one which is shaped by the attitudes and expectations of students, of parents, of school administrators, of materials writers and many others including, of course, each teacher as an individual in his or her own right.

Understanding what takes place in classrooms therefore involves exploring what different participants—students and teachers in the first instance, but many others, too—bring with them to the classroom and how this influences what they do within it. This, in turn, involves exploring participants' identities and listening to their voices (Bailey and Nunan, 1996).

4. A changing research agenda

The remarks made in the last section raise the question as to what we are in fact referring to when we are involved in discussing language teaching. The technological perspective focuses on potentialities and assumes a fairly linear relationship between input and uptake. The ecological perspective, on the other hand, focuses on actual realities as they are lived out in particular contexts. The shift in emphasis from a technological to an ecological perspective on language teaching therefore involves a change in the focus of attention, and therefore a change in what we are primarily concerned with when we talk about "language teaching".

Nunan makes a useful point in this respect by distinguishing between two ways in which the term "curriculum" can be understood. The first is the curriculum "as a statement of intent, the 'what should be' of a language programme as set out in syllabus outlines, sets of objectives, and various planning documents." The other is the curriculum "as reality", or "what actually goes on from moment to moment in the language classroom" (1989: 9). A relationship is of course likely to exist between the two. The official curriculum can influence day-to-day classroom realities in a number of ways, if only because a certain pedagogical approach or set of materials may be recommended for use in classrooms. Classroom teaching, however, involves more than the elegant realisation of theoretical precept. It is something much more complex and, to use Freeman's (1996) term, "messy". One problem, of course, is that while the official discourse of language teaching as found in methodology texts and curriculum descriptions is accessible to scrutiny and discussion, the day-to-day reality of teaching is far less accessible and is infinitely dispersed. It is thus difficult to discuss it in a systematic manner, which does not, however, mean that it does not merit discussion at least to the same degree as the official discourse.

Adopting an ecological perspective requires us to look for the reality of language teaching beyond the "official" version we find in academic publications and curriculum descriptions. It also requires us to look beyond the concept of rationality as a single concept and to acknowledge the existence of different rationalities (Tudor, 1998), i.e. different understandings or ways of perceiving situations and choices. In essence, it assumes that teaching and learning will be effective only if they acknowledge and work with the various understandings and perceptions which participants bring with them to the classroom and to the teaching–learning experience. This, in

turn, calls for an open acknowledgement of diversity as a fundamental component of language teaching. Diversity, indeed, is more likely to be the norm than the exception, as has been shown with respect to English language teaching (ELT) projects in countries with educational traditions different from those of the Anglo-Saxon world (Coleman, 1996a; Holliday, 1994; Markee, 1997). Even within a given culture, however, it cannot be assumed that all participants will share the same perceptions and goal structures, particularly during periods of change when social groupings and ideologies are in a state of flux. Rather than the elegant realisation of one rationality, then, language teaching is likely to involve the meeting and interaction of different rationalities. Murray (1996) is therefore right in drawing attention to the "tapestry of diversity" which makes our classrooms what they are. It is therefore necessary to explore what the classroom means to the different participants involved, and how these various understandings influence participants' choices and decisions.

Doing this calls for an investigative methodology which makes it possible to gain insight into different participants' perceptions of a situation in their own terms and not simply with respect to a template of values developed by any one group of participants. This is true of the formal type of research which is reported in specialist journals, and also with respect to the applied, situation-specific type of research which is involved in preparing a teaching programme for a given class, institution or region. An important distinction in this respect is that between *etic* and *emic* approaches to research (cf. Bailey and Nunan, 1996: 3–4; Van Lier, 1988: 16–17). The *etic* approach, which has tended to dominate in language teaching research, adopts the standpoint of the outsider concerned with general principles and objectively verifiable phenomena: It represents what is generally seen as the "scientific method" and is strongly influenced by positivist thinking. *Emic* research, on the other hand, accords more attention to the perspective of insiders—how participants perceive a situation and their place within it. It is also concerned with discovering local coherence, or how a system operates in terms of its own inner logic and rules. This type of research is sometimes referred to as naturalistic inquiry in that it works with systems as they are, and seeks to discover how they operate from the perspective of those who are involved in these systems, as opposed to studying them in the light of criteria derived from outside of the system itself. Not surprisingly, this type of research is frequent in ethnography as a means of discovering the belief and value systems of societies unfamiliar to the observer.

Emic research frequently involves working with "soft" data which can provide insight into the understandings and motivations of participants. Such data may arise from diary studies or personal accounts of learning and teaching experiences, or from open-ended discussion with participants about their individual perceptions of a situation. They may also derive from the study of the educational traditions of a given culture or institution, the interpersonal norms and decision-making structures in place, or the ways in which change is generally realised, as well as of factors such as the perceived status of the TL or the socioeconomic status and self-image of either students or teachers. Information of this nature makes it possible to look beyond the surface script of interaction in the classroom to the meaning which

events have for participants. This brings the concerns of researchers closer to the day-to-day experience of practising language teachers. Teachers know that their task is rarely straightforward, and that the key to effective teaching is the ability to feel and respond to the dynamics of each class as it is in its own terms. It is perhaps for this reason that practising teachers sometimes express a certain scepticism about the confident generalisations put forward in the theoretical literature. They know that each class is unique, and that the teacher must learn to respond to this uniqueness, whether it corresponds to an ideal picture of what a classroom should be or not. As Freeman pertinently suggests:

> The complexity of teaching cannot be cleaned up simply by pretending it is not there; order cannot be forced on to it by writing and talking in a detached manner about its messiness. (1996: 107)

An acknowledgement of the complexity of language teaching does not promise neat, unambiguous solutions or paths of action. It does, however, point our energies in the right direction, which is at least a first step towards finding appropriate and sustainable responses.

5. The ecological perspective in practice

While the ecological perspective on language teaching does not offer neat, pre-packageable solutions, it does provide a number of relatively clear guidelines as to how pedagogical decision making should be approached.

The first relates to the concept of "*localness*". This implies that, as language teaching and learning are always lived out "locally", in the specifics of a given situation, decision making, too, needs to be a local phenomenon. A technological approach to language teaching operates on the more or less explicitly stated assumption that established "mainstream" methodology has an inherent power to promote learning, and that it can be transferred to and implemented in specific situations in a fairly direct manner. In the world of ELT, this tends to involve the transfer of methodological approaches developed in Anglo-Saxon countries into the many different settings in which English is studied and taught. An ecological approach, on the other hand, focuses in the first instance on local realities—what language learning and teaching *mean* to local participants in the full context of their lives, within but also beyond the classroom. An ecological approach to pedagogical decision making therefore entails studying situations "locally", in their own terms, and working towards situational (Elliott, 1993) or local (Freeman, 2000; Tudor, 2002) understandings. An ecological approach therefore rests on the concept of local meaningfulness.

The second involves the inclusion of an explicitly *ethnographic* component in pedagogical decision making. Ethnography, however, is not simply a matter of studying "the other". No methodological choice is unmarked, and "mainstream" ELT methodology is just as marked in ethnographic terms as the learning cultures

of Belgium, China, Peru, Sri Lanka or any other of the many countries in which English is studied and taught. Exploring the ethnographic underpinnings of the methodological options which are available at a given point in time can help us to understand the meaning which these options are likely to assume for the students and teachers with whom they are to be used. In this respect, it is important to distinguish between methodology as theoretical principle and methodology as pedagogical reality in the classroom. Methodology as pedagogical reality arises not simply from the theoretical potential of the methodological options in question but rather from the meaning which these options assume for local participants: this is intimately linked to the assumptions and expectations which these participants bring with them to the classroom and to the teaching–learning process, and is thus highly context-specific. This logically implies that teacher education courses, too, should include an component explicitly geared to helping teachers adopt an ethnographic perspective on their methodological choices.

One specific manifestation of this strategy involves the exploration of local *cultures of learning* (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996), i.e. students' habitual mode of learning, favoured study strategies, and their general ethos of study and learning, as well as the beliefs, attitudes, and expectations which underpin these behaviours. Exploring students' culture of learning can allow teachers to better understand the meaning which these options have for students in the light of their habitual modes of learning and of classroom interaction, and thus students' interaction with methodological options in question. To begin with, this can help to avoid ill-informed judgements of local practice by helping language educators from outside of the context in question to understand students' actions and behaviours in terms of the meaning they have for the students in question. Furthermore, and perhaps most fundamentally, it can provide positive guidelines for methodological intervention. The idea here is that, by harnessing students' habitual approach to learning, it may be possible to develop an approach to learning to which students can relate in a spontaneous and harmonious manner. In other words, local learning dynamics can serve as a source of guidance in the choice of methodology. This is a strategy which involves looking *into* the target context itself and not *outside* of it for guidance in methodological decision making. Coleman (1996b) and Kershaw (1997) (cf. also, Tudor, 2001: 157–180) provide enlightening accounts of precisely this form of locally-oriented pedagogical exploration. This is an ecological strategy which operates on the basis of local meaningfulness as a basis for methodological decision making.

Finally, it is very important to focus on the *dynamics* of teaching–learning situations (Tudor, 2001). The technological perspective postulates a fairly linear relationship between methodological principle and pedagogical reality. In practice, the pedagogical reality which methodology assumes in the classroom arises dynamically from the interaction of participants with one another, with the methodology in question, and with the broader context within which they are operating. In this respect, the ecological perspective on language teaching has common ground with wider trends in current scientific research, many of which are discussed under the general heading of Complexity Theory (cf. Kaufman, 1995; Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Lewin, 1993; Waldrop, 1992). Studying the dynamics of teaching–learnng situations can confront us with a

kaleidescope of detail which may often seem confusing, contradictory and, at times, rather trivial. And yet, this is where language teaching is lived out, and where the value of principle is put to the hard test of reality. Indeed, the essence of an ecological perspective on language teaching is precisely that it works with situations in their own terms and in the light of the dynamics which operate in these situations.

6. Conclusion

This article has looked at our profession's growing acknowledgement of the complex and multifaceted nature of language teaching in terms of the emergence of an ecological perspective on teaching and learning. The ecological perspective has been emerging for some time, as indicated in Section 3; furthermore, it has always been part and parcel of the day-to-day concerns of practising teachers and other language educators. What is significant in recent years, however, is that the ecological perspective has begun to assume the role of an explicit paradigm in programme design and pedagogical planning.

One of the most significant implications of this change in orientation relates to the search for general principles which language educators can use to guide their actions. The technological perspective has tended to look for these principles in the surface script of methodology. The ecological perspective, on the other hand, has set a more complex and more challenging agenda, one that involves exploring the deep script of human interaction with the learning process, not in isolation, but within the broader context of students' concerns, attitudes and perceptions. It is unlikely that this endeavour will yield neat solutions. It does, however, open the door to a better understanding of the uniqueness of each teaching situation and, thereby, to the development of an approach to teaching which is locally relevant and meaningful by virtue of it being rooted in local realities.

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