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AN ECOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO QUALITY IN ESP TEACHING/LEARNING

Abstract: *This paper looks at language learning from an ecological perspective, which highlights the quality aspect of educational processes. Some essential concepts this approach focuses on are building ecologically holistic contexts, interaction, and quality. In language learning ecology, practice constantly draws on theory which is developing organically, as teachers and learners interact and learners cooperate among peers. Our research sets out to survey and illustrate these basic principles of the ecological approach from a theoretical as well as practical perspective, using experimental-informed data from our shared teaching contexts.*

Keywords: *Language learning/teaching, English for Special Purposes, Quality, Eco-linguistics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Our research aims to shed light on teaching strategies relying on principles of quality and seeking to accomplish quality in teaching, as well as designing the ESP course support. We continue a joint research project we started in 2016 with colleagues from Serbia and Romania who are researchers in applied linguistics, as well as material developers and teachers of practical ESP courses at the Faculty of Engineering from the University of Kragujevac, Serbia and the BUASVM University “King Michael I of Romania” from Timișoara. The paper discusses learning strategies and ESP teaching approaches which informed our choices when designing the textbooks: *English for Mechanical Engineers* (Rață, Stefanović, 2010), *English for Farm Managers* (Rață, Groszler, Dragoescu & all., 2011) and *English for Agricultural Engineers* (Dragoescu, Coroamă, 2016). In conducting this research, we join forces again to elaborate a theoretical rationale for an ecolinguistic approach to ESP textbook design and teaching based on principles of quality. Also, the paper suggests a number of strategies that may further contribute to quality enhancement, in view of current sociocultural demands.

The paper outlines some basic theoretical aspects of an ecological approach, focusing on their practical implications for the learning context in relation to quality. Proponents of the ecological paradigm in language teaching and

learning bring arguments for an ecological methodology which is rooted in a wider ecological worldview. The social context and interaction patterns in which the learners engage are central to an ecolinguistic understanding of learning (van Lier, 2000: 246). The underpinning concept of the ecological paradigm in language learning is that all elements within an ecosystem, for instance a classroom, in our case, are interconnected. The main elements the study focuses on are quality and interaction, seen as ecological features of teaching/learning. Instead of pursuing selective aspects of learning or teaching, the ecological approach makes reference to complex ecosystems and encourages researchers to investigate the complexity of the learning process in an inclusive, dynamic and holistic manner. Some valuable insights into this kind of research have been developed by van Lier (2004) and other emergent ecolinguistic approaches. These types of research are increasingly more appreciated in the field of applied linguistics, given the enhanced understanding of learning they provide in relation to the concept of quality. The major characteristics this paradigm has in common with the study of ecology are the focus on the (learning) environment, quality, value, and relationships rather than objects (van Lier, 2004).

In establishing quality criteria, we have relied on several comparative frameworks from the communicative approach to the current ecolinguistic school of thought. The long-

established application of ecology to linguistics challenges the traditional mechanistic input-output type of approach to language teaching. Prominent eco-linguists like Kramsch (2002) and Breen (2001) have focused on language socialization and, essentially, on aspects related to interaction in the classroom context as the preeminent means of language acquisition. Placing learning in its proper context, i.e. according to the students' interests and particularities leads to the creation of a "linguistic ecosystem" (Thornbury, 2010). This analogy is built on the fact that speakers use language with a view to integrating or adapting to their environments in a "reciprocal process of interaction". Thus, the classroom may be seen as an "ecological system", displaying interaction patterns among peers and teachers (Breen, 2001). Thereby, a language class becomes "an arena of subjective and intersubjective realities which are worked out, changed and maintained [...] and they continually specify and mould the activities of teaching and learning (Breen, 2001: 128).

Breen's ecological approach to organic classroom experience highlights the diverse nature of language learning. Given the complexity of interactions taking place within the classroom, he uses the metaphorical image of classes as "coral gardens" to illustrate the fact that classes generally develop complex social cultures in the same manner that language learning is experienced by teachers and learners in an emergent, reciprocal experience (Breen, 2001: 127). From an ecological perspective of the classroom environment, the "coral garden" metaphor suggests a dynamic process which is constructed by teachers and learners in cooperation.

References to quality in various teaching or learning methodologies often indicate the very elements mentioned above. This enables our association between quality learning/teaching strategies and the ecological approach to language acquisition. Our research surveys the learning process, the activities of both teachers and learners, and the many-sided nature of class interactions as a network of interdependencies among the constituents of the classroom context.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research we have conducted in collaboration is based on several years of academic work in the language classrooms and ESP design, as a result of our joint explorations incorporating practice, research and theory. This experience has brought us to the conclusion that theory should not be disconnected from practice, according to Kurt Lewin's catchphrase that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (1952: 169). Our approach to language teaching attempts to cancel out this disjunctive clash, as these two aspects of education should not be mutually exclusive. Therefore, our research method is on the one hand grounded in theory and also drawing on practical experience in the actual learning environment, on the other hand.

Ecological Linguistics or the ecolinguistic approach to the theory of language provides a more comprehensive framework to our research. To this theoretical background, we have added our own experience as ESP practitioners, researchers, as well as teachers. Our students of ESP have been subjected to an empirical study based on our assumption concerning the comparative effectiveness of our language teaching tools. We hoped and designed these in order to improve the learners' functional communicative skills and enhance patterns of interaction for quality language acquisition.

Furthermore, this paper attempts to put our research hypotheses to test by compiling empirical evidence from the classroom in order to make it not only theoretical, but as applied as possible. We have set out to identify the most outstanding features of effective ESP teaching tools for the students' practical use and to include them in our textbooks. Our main aim is to contribute to the comprehensive development of language skills in context within the framework of the ecological approach. Another target is to mediate between language teaching/learning and theories of quality.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the ecolinguistic paradigm of language teaching, some of the primary quality criteria we have identified are: establishing interaction, building performative competences,

engagement with real-life issues and development of sustainable outcomes. Any discussion regarding ESP methodology entails organizing a coherent set of teaching principles which will expectantly lead to the most effective learning outcomes, in terms of achieving quality. The paper proposes a discussion of the most relevant questions we have asked in this respect and highlights the teaching principles we deemed indispensable in our ESP classes. First and foremost, achieving quality is also one of the basic tenets of ecolinguistics. For that reason, our research proposes a discussion of quality in all its contexts, as a reciprocal relation that integrates practice and theoretical input. Even though this notion has long been one of teachers' chief concerns, it also remains one of the most indefinite and elusive subjects in linguistics and language methodology.

As teachers, adhering to standards of quality in teaching/learning is associated to proposing a well-considered set of standards which we are responsible to apply. We asked ourselves what elements would be required in order for the ESP class to promote the quality of the educational experience. As far as classroom practice is concerned, quality has been understood as a teaching method which can be validated due to its effectiveness, *i.e.* students become proficient in the targeted field of study. Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggest the notion of "method" comprises several dimensions: the syllabus (the manner in which language is selected and organized), learner roles (grouping patterns), the teacher's role and influence on learning, and teaching materials which are selected according to the method. Besides discussing these aspects in detail, a major concern the paper addresses is textbook writing based on criteria of quality, aiming to suggest some practical applications.

We pondered on the question of what exactly it is that makes English language teaching and learning successful or effective. Authors seem to be largely in agreement with our own perspective upon the matter: effective teachers are those who achieve goals they set for themselves. Anderson finds that effective teachers are aware of goals and consistently achieve goals they set for themselves, while focusing on the learning of their students (1991:18-22). This in turn is determined by the teachers' language proficiency and teaching

skills, but is also contingent on interpersonal communication abilities. Similarly, Brown places the interactive approach at the heart of effective language teaching. From his standpoint, the successful language teacher possesses four all-inclusive features: technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, personal qualities, and interpersonal skills (Brown, 2001).

Another question we ask repeatedly is what works better in the ESP class to improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience. Paraphrasing Howatt (1984:279), we wonder whether the learner is learning in order to use English or rather using English in order to learn it, the latter being the stronger strategy which has stood the test of time. Quality requires that the content of instruction be modified in ways that make it more accessible to learners. The content of ESP lessons is more motivating when it is grounded in the relevant concerns of actual learners in the classroom, rather than abstract characters in a conventional course book. On these grounds, we have personalized our textbooks by making content applicable to the students' real needs.

As regards the procedural aspects of transmitting selected content to learners, the role of instructional materials also needs an appraisal in terms of quality. As material developers, we are aware it is the role of instructional materials to influence the quality of classroom interaction. Among the functional types of instructional material selected for our ESP course support, some of the most efficient ones have proved the following: texts we used as stimulus for follow-up tasks and discussion points, information-gap readings, role-plays, and games. These activities often display a functional, applied configuration, but they are designed with the aim of preparing students for the real communicative situations they are likely to encounter outside the classroom in their field of work.

In addition to adapting material to students' actual needs, the term "authentic" has been used to refer to the quality of classroom interactions, as opposed to traditional mechanical exchange which is artificial and conventional (Thornbury, 2006: 19-20). Having this in mind, we selected our material and created an ESP syllabus based on authentic texts slightly adapted to the students' comprehension abilities and needs. A text is

considered authentic if it was initially addressed to non-classroom users rather than simulated or reproduced from artificially streamlined texts. ESP is specifically an area of language learning which prepares students for real-life use of language, thus deeming inauthentic texts as being inadequate. Acquisition of proper terminology plays an essential role in mastering the discourse of any profession, understanding key concepts and bibliographical references. Thus, authentic (or minimally adapted) texts and materials play a major role in courses designed to teach ESP in general and our courses as a particular case in point.

Another equally important related aspect is developing the English language learners' "performative competence" or "competence for practice" within ESP classes. According to Canagarajah (2014), this entails processes such as achieving procedural knowledge and focusing on practices rather than form. It also seems to have several features in common with the ecological approach: the prerequisite to co-construct the terms of engagement in learning and the motivation of being responsive to the cooperative completion of tasks or goals. For this purpose, our students are required to work in groups, make choices, take up subject positions, negotiate with peers, reach joint decisions, and report their views to the class.

Teacher-learner interaction has also been a foremost subject of study in ecological linguistics, since language functions to establish and carry on symbolic relationships in human ecosystems. Thus, classroom relationships and patterns of interaction are a foremost concern in relation to quality, just as ecology addresses relationships and interactions among elements within an ecosystem. Researchers have compared teacher-learner interaction with the kind of interaction occurring in non-classroom contexts. Conventional teacher-led exchanges typical of traditional classes may not provide the best language environment for learning, as they display a reduced amount of interactivity. Genuinely sustainable learning occurs when interaction opportunities are enhanced, when learners are more empowered and the teacher's role is more focused on facilitation and providing interactional support.

Interactive patterns in ecologically sustainable classes have been addressed by our

training method from an ecolinguistic point of view. We have identified and introduced several types of activities that enforce interactivity, which were initially evaluated as not sufficiently trained. At the beginning of ESP courses, the majority of students displayed rather low readiness to interconnect and work in groups and generally rather underdeveloped communicative skills (Coroamă, 2016:14-15). The activities we proposed involved role taking, interactivity, contact between the participants, prompting dialogue among learners, and discussing in pairs/groups, expressing opinions, and engaging the interlocutor in a safe and spontaneous environment. By the end of the first semester, evaluators remarked more satisfactory levels of frontal communication, whereas the level of interaction among students was still low. During the second semester of experimental teaching, ESP students started working in groups more autonomously, bringing an additional degree of interactivity to the English class. Following two semesters of ESP training according to this methodology, the results obtained at the final assessment confirmed that students not only understood contents and were able to respond to the evaluators' enquiry, but were also able to express their opinion and personal attitude regarding the subject of communication. Thus, the proposed working methodology has assisted students to achieve enhanced interpersonal skills, as well as the capacity to work in teams and adapt to other group members in new situations while negotiating opinions and perspectives (Dragoescu, Groszler, Stefanović, 2017).

As regards the teacher's role, another reliable indicator of quality in language learning and teaching is the notion of "facilitating" learning, a fundamental prerequisite for language classes and textbook design. The teacher as facilitator theory suggests teachers do not directly cause learning, but rather ensure that the conditions for learning are met. This concept is espoused by Thornbury, according to whom "the learner should not be seen as the object of the verb to teach, but the subject of the verb to learn" (2006: 79). Accordingly, teachers who facilitate learning may be required to act as a prompt for learners and provide appropriate learning resources. Teachers also need to make sure they provide adequate language practice, as well as

linguistic input and opportunities for language acquisition. Moreover, we must take into consideration not only the quantity of learners' interaction, but also its quality. Consequently, the role teachers assume in the language classroom impacts not only the quality of the teaching discourse, but "wider patterns of classroom interaction" (Thornbury, 2006: 26). Furthermore, the quality of interaction seems to depend significantly on the nature of the task, its structural formulation and the outcomes material developers had in mind (Thornbury, 2006:107). It has been our purpose when designing our ESP textbooks to catch the learners' attention, to continuously elicit information and produce a communicative response, to constantly check understanding and to integrate them in genuine language exchange. Much attention was paid in formulating tasks in order to take these aims into action. Language acquisition can be efficiently stimulated by meaningful tasks and activities which relate to real world situations and which engage the students' interest.

While considering these criteria in the design of activities for our textbooks, post-experimental observations confirmed that these strategies actively implemented real language use in the ESP class in naturalistic learning situations (Dragoescu, Groszler, Stefanović, 2017). Among the various types of language practice, Thornbury identifies controlled practice versus free production, mechanical versus meaningful communicative practice, and receptive versus productive practice (2006: 173). Practice may consist of drills, repetition, information gaps, to free discussions, games and problem-solving activities (with a "real-world" context such as planning your career in engineering or drawing a business plan to engage the students' utmost interest. Other stimulating tasks which work to encourage authentic exchange are those which promote negotiation of meaning or viewpoint to reach a group decision (e.g. "Choose the best option from the following list of crops" or "In groups, decide which is the best alternative/argument in favour of...", *etc*). Such tasks, which require joint problem-solving provide a more naturalistic source of interaction as a site for using language for negotiating with peers. Finally, creating an agency-promoting curriculum, as well as an agency-rich environment in the classroom, can stimulate

learners by facilitating occasions for them to work as members of a learning community on tasks they may find motivating. In the light of these considerations, a conspicuously cohesive element that all the above discussed points have in common is essentially the use of interaction.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study is meant as an overview of some key aspects related to quality in language learning, especially interaction patterns in the ESP classroom and material development for a specific purpose. We have raised several concerns that we hope may bring us closer to achieving quality within the ESP learning/teaching environment. Even though some linguists may consider we are now in the Postmethod era of methodological eclecticism, "methods can be studied not as prescriptions, but as a source of well-used practices", which can be adapted to learners' particular needs (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 16). For example, the development of communicative methods leaves an amount of valuable tools for the benefit of ecologically-minded ESP teachers. Also, the audiolingual method focused heavily on drilling and practising dialogues in the language class and Task-based theory of language learning dealt primarily with tasks to guide L2 acquisition. However, as we have shown, these types of activities, as well as the well-considered use of tasks are also useful today.

In conclusion, instead of dismissing any of the previous methodologies, we come to an agreement with eco-linguistic perspectives that all of them provide helpful alternatives as sources for classroom practical applications. Various methods have emphasized different aspects and language skills as being of primary importance in language acquisition. Some methods have addressed the classroom mainly as a system of grammatical rules or patterns, while others deemed that expressing meaning or communicating to solve tasks are more important. An ecological, holistic approach would rather combine these perspectives, adapting diversity to the specificity of each learning environment taken as a whole. This perspective takes us from an incomplete view of ESP teaching/learning to a more comprehensive understanding of language which emphasizes quality and authenticity, far

beyond isolated aspects of grammar or vocabulary. We hope this overview has answered the question of how these aspects can

all be qualitatively adjusted and intertwined coherently in the practice of ESP teaching and learning.

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