The Effects of Eco-system Movement in Foreign Language Instruction

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Abstract

Ecosystem approach to English Language instruction is based on the concept of language ecology. In this ever changing world nothing is static. After so many approaches, methods, views, and ideas, ecological approach has made its appearance on the ELT stage. The approach is new to many language teachers who equate it with teaching ecology through the foreign language teaching. This research study presents the origin of ecosystem approach, shows differences between ecological approach to foreign language teaching, presents situation of language ecology, and suggests the reasonable movements and methods in foreign language instruction.
Keywords: eco-system approach, multilingual instruction, methods, English language teaching

Ecosystem of Language

Ecological approach to language learning believes on the preservation and promotion of all the languages so called big and small, prestigious and non-prestigious of all language families that are used in a society. Everything in this universe has a place what is called ecology, and destruction or disappearance of one has negative effect on all the rest, and ultimately damages the ecological system. The same is true in language ecology, that is, death or disappearance of one language damages the language ecosystem. If we need to maintain the ecological balance to keep our planet safe and beautiful, we should try to maintain the language ecological balance by giving each language its proper place to keep our society safe and beautiful. This language ecology was highly disturbed in the last 200 years, with the consequent restriction and destruction of the habitats of the majority of the world's linguistic ecologies.

Language ecology was originally defined in 1972 by the Norwegian Linguist Einar Haugen as 'the study of interactions between any given language and its environment' (Haugen, 2001). The definition echoes the German biologist Ernst Haeckl's (1866, as quoted in Kramsch and Steffenson, 2008) definition of ecology within the life sciences as 'die gesammte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden Aussenwelt, wohin wir im weiteren Sinne alle Existenz-Bedingungen' rechnen können' (the total science of the organism's relations to the surrounding environment, to which we can count in a wider sense all 'conditions of existence'" Today, language ecology has become a widespread approach within such fields as second language acquisition (SLA), bi- and multilingualism and diversity, death and revitalization (Crystal, 2000).

"A keyword in ecology, whether in life sciences, or in linguistics, is holism. A holistic approach to linguistics implies that language is not be studied as an isolated, self-contained

system, but rather in its natural surrounding, i.e. in relation to the personal, situational, cultural, and societal factors that collectively shape the production and evolution of language, ontogentically as well as phylogentically. Linguistic holism leads to a number of methodological considerations, shared by the majority of ecolinguists." (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008)

Language ecology or ecology of language advocates the dynamics of interaction and coexistence of all languages in a social context. 'A language ecology perspective follows the metaphor of an ecosystem with a balance ensuring survival of all species. In the case of languages, language ecology analyzes power dynamics and issues of equity and human rights as fundamental elements in the social use of languages. The goal is to ensure that the promotion of any one language, in the name of globalization, for example, does not make causalities of historically important local languages. Instead, these can become empowered as the result of increased social interactions with a larger world.' (Mora, 2013)

Language ecology is used in several fields including language teaching and learning, and scholars from different areas such as linguistics, applied linguistics, World Englishes, and literacy use this concept to develop frameworks for the protection and promotion of local and indigenous languages that are slowly disappearing. Language ecology supports 'bilinguialism and multilingalism, language policy (especially in developing countries), and language education, particularly vis-a-vis the role of English and today's world.'
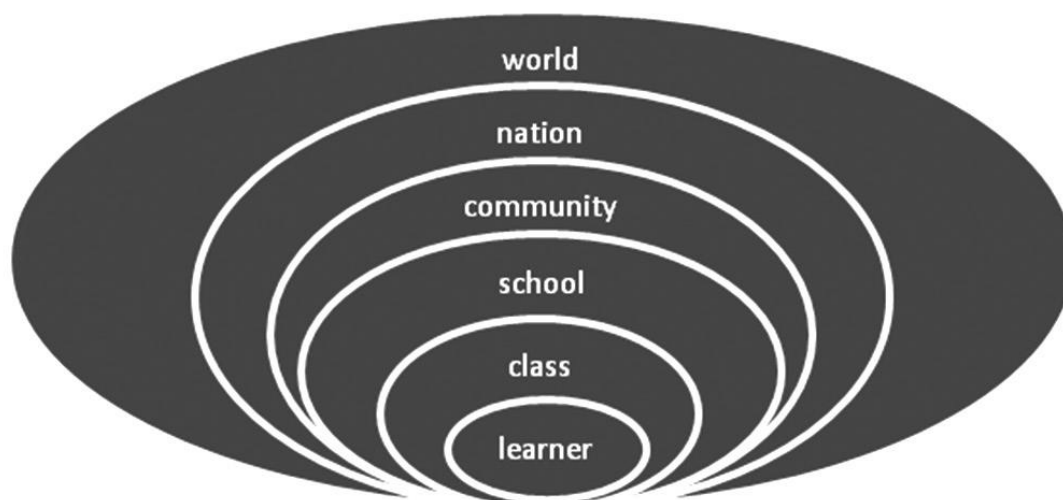
Ecological Approach

'Ecological approach' came as a reaction to the cognitive approach (Krashen, 1985) hypothesized that adult L2 learning involves formally studying grammatical structures and rules, and the learners can be under-users, over-users or optimal-users of the formal knowledge. He also thought that language is acquired in a predictable order (i.e. first noun and verbs, simple structures then progressively advance towards more complex tenses, conjugations and structures. The learner's advance happens with comprehensible input (i+1) just above her in liguistic competence. She learns by concentrating on meaning of the new sentences, not the forms. Lastly, the learner's emotional side is an important component of learning as right motivation is an anxiety free environment that encourages use of the language.

Unlike the Piagetian view of learning as a cognitive process in the brain, van Lier's ecological approach is influenced by Vygostky and Cole (1978)'s social constructivism where social interaction with more knowledgeable with others is believed to precede the cognitive development for a learner to advance to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Bakhtin (1986)'s dialogic view of human utterances as interrelated responses with meanings inextricably linked to the culture. Under this approach, language learning environment is characterized as relations, possibility, opportunity, immediacy, and interaction that the learner faces. This approach is ecological in that the learner's attempt to look for interaction opportunities is understood as affordance (Gibson, 1977), how living organism perceive and adapt to the environment for survival.

Ecological approach which includes the idea of holistic approach that encompasses all those things that combining together create the environment of learning for the learner. The idea can be presented diagrammatically as shown below. Keeping learner in the centre ecological approach to foreign language teaching-learning advocates all those factors that help learner learn foreign language better. To quote van Lier (2010) "...all elements within an ecosystem (such as a classroom) are interrelated. Research often isolates particular pieces of the puzzle in order to study them in detail. No matter how useful it is, it obscures the dynamism of the actual teaching and learning work that goes on, and cannot show the emergent and contingent nature of that work." What does the ecosystem of a classroom consist of? Obviously

all those elements that surround the learner and affect his foreign language learning such as classmates, teacher, books, tests, etc., (school), mother tongue, culture, family, relationship, etc., (community), education policy and language policy of the state, etc., (nation) and so on.

As ecological approach to language teaching-learning is based on the linguistic or language ecology, it supports and advocates of multilingual/ plurilingual approach of teaching. The use of mother tongue in language classroom, it should not be considered as crime, and learner must not be punished if they use their mother tongue in a foreign language class. According to the spirit of the approach, teachers who know the learner's native language and culture are the best teachers. This means that a Turkish English teacher (non-native teacher) is a better teacher of a Turkish learner of English, and not a native teacher (a teacher whose mother tongue is English). Besides all those elements that surrounds the learner such as local teaching learning materials, etc. help them learn the foreign language well.

ELT in Turkey

English is a foreign language in Turkey. It is true that it is popular and its popularity is growing every day. The private school with English as medium of instruction is mushrooming. People are led to believe that English is invariably essential for Turkey. Thousands of Turkish young men and women go to overseas countries to study or as labours. They are led to believe that if you do not know English, you cannot get a job in overseas countries. There is no question to the fact that English is a must for higher education, but the number of Turkish people going overseas for further education in comparison to do manual work, can be counted on fingers. It is also a widespread common belief that if you teach English right from the beginning, say at the age of 4 or even earlier, kids will learn better. This is the reason that even some government schools has started teaching English from grade 1. This belief is false because many studies conducted in different parts of the world have shown that English is learned better if the kids are exposed to it not at an early age but after 5 years of schooling. UNICEF has declared that the learners learn best if they are helped to learn through their first language, and if their competence in first language is good, it helps them to learn English better. Studies have shown that if kids are taught English at an early age, their English will be alright for a certain level, but their competency in English for higher level thinking will not be good.

Discussion

It can be said that Turkish foreign language teachers are far away from the ecological approach of English language by trying to make their learners like native speakers by putting undue importance on pronunciation, by underrating the learner's mother tongue, by closing their eyes to local context. What they are doing as practising teachers of English seems un-ecological.

In the context of Turkey, and in case of ELT, there should be more emphasis on practice than on theory –a shift from knowledge to action. Turkish English teachers have more than enough knowledge on how to teach better by engaging learners (using games, songs, tasks, and so on), how can develop themselves (case studies, action research, reflective teaching, and so on), how to handle a large class, or how to help differently abled pupils or helping learners who speak different languages in the same class, and many other things. What they need is actual practice in playing game with learners, doing action research, and conducting a multilingual class.

There should be shift of focus from teaching is a skill to teaching is an art in pedagogy, and from listening and speaking to reading and writing in language skill teaching. It is sad but true that communicative method failed in developing countries not because teachers are not good or students are unmotivated but because the learners have no opportunity at all to practice what they learned in their class once they come out of the class. It is also true that we learn English by reading and writing: not many schools in Turkey teach four skills at the same time in a proficient level. It is, therefore, a must that more focus should be on four skills. English teachers and Ministry of Education should realize that there is not just one English but Englishes in the present world. It is assumed, and the recent researches support the after 50 years or so native speakers of English might not be able to understand all the varieties which would be spoken in the world.

Lastly, testing for the purpose of saying pass or fail doesnt service its real aims at all. Those who pass, particularly in higher grade are always in tension to maintain the position, and those who fail suffer a demoralized life. It is also a bitter truth that in an examination of 2 or 3 hours duration, there is no way that language proficiency can be tested or measured, and labelled as pass and fail. Testing should, therefore, be removed as it has been removed from school education in Finland and other Eurropean countries.

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