

EXTENDING THE COLLABORATIVE POTENTIAL OF ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract. *The paper puts forth a presentation of our guiding aims regarding the collaborative research we have undertaken in recent years, on-going projects, and knowledge-transfer activities. We wish to bring our contribution to the internationalization of higher education and to participate in relevant networks of communication promoting an interdisciplinary and ecological perspective on education. For this purpose, we have designed english learning materials in line with interdisciplinary curricula for students within various faculties related to life sciences within the BUASVM "KING MICHAEL I OF ROMANIA" FROM TIMISOARA. By presenting more details about our work in progress, we ultimately hope to promote the acquisition of soft skills and purposeful, meaningful communication with and between students and future european citizens, as well as promoting ecological awareness through a constructivist learning framework. Our contribution to the trans-disciplinary dialogue between english language teachers and researchers across borders enables the paper to be seen as a manifesto for cooperation between ecologically-minded professionals of english as a foreign language (efl) and english for specific purposes (esp).*

Keywords: *English language; teaching; ESP (English for Specific Purposes); Ecolinguistics; communication; collaborative education; value system.*

INTRODUCTION

The paper presents our constant effort as a team to develop a consistent theoretical and methodological framework for our pedagogical and research activities in the field of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). We have been involved in knowledge-transfer activities and projects developed by international associations such as the International Ecolinguistics Association. These networks have provided insights and specialized online courses for teachers and researchers interested in ecological topics. We have been working collaboratively with colleagues from other countries and we would like to share some of our insights with the community of English language teachers, especially those engaged in ESP program and curricula development. As a result, another aim we have in view is to produce materials to support this pedagogical outlook which promotes ecological awareness in students enrolled in all faculties of life-sciences within the BUASVM "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara. Not least importantly, the basic tenet of our joint research and development project seeks to enhance the students' ecological consciousness and to improve their/our communicative and other soft skills.

The paper also presents feedback on the work carried out by the authors during 2017-2018 in the ARCA program for educators, among others, in our larger collaborative project.

This stands proof that the research we have conducted in the last two years, as well as the ESP materials we have developed, are supported by permanent self-development activities, which we would like to share with peers from the ESP teaching community.

Above all, we believe in the importance of correlating the teachers' value system not only with the professional research they conduct, but also with its adaptation for the students – the actual recipients of the educational system. In turn, professional development cannot be achieved in the absence of self-scrutiny, i.e. “the examination of the way in which each value belief influences teacher behaviour in the classroom” (BLOOM & ELLIS, 2009: 2). The global ecological crisis is undoubtedly correlated with the crisis of values generated by the current worldview, including the emphasis on quantity and the constant pressure of productivity. The following discussion also raises the question of reconsidering the need for quality (as opposed to quantity) in guiding teachers' self-development and generating research/educational content based on a personal axiological system.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Our research approach builds on two basic frameworks – Constructivist and Ecolinguistic pedagogy. From an ecological perspective on language competence and eco-literacy, learning about inter-relatedness within the community and the larger web of life is crucial to understanding the interconnectedness of human and natural systems. We are aiming to make a case for integrated communication which can be achieved through the micro-routines typical of a language class from teaching students to express their view of the world to cultivating relational and cooperative learning. Learners can only achieve meaningful (self-)expression and inter-communication by engaging in routines in which they are participants as opposed to being disconnected spectators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In recent decades, language studies have transcended the mechanistic perspective of a fixed body of knowledge to be acquired through repetition. Use of language is increasingly being understood socially and contextually, with vast implications in changing landscapes on a global level. Far from being devoid of value, language is intrinsically connected not only to the situational context, but also to the “context of culture”, as “there is no meaning without context” (HALLIDAY, 1978). Eco-critical studies and Ecolinguistics have shown the relevance of learning language in relation to the environment, as we are all involved in the conceptual decoding of meaning superstructures. For instance, our understanding of concepts like *growth* and *progress* may have very harmful consequences upon the environment (HALLIDAY, 1990: 175-179). It is therefore the teachers' task to assist learners of English for Specific Purposes in acquiring and discriminating between different possible implications, meanings, and underlying assumptions in the language of natural sciences.

The strong trans-disciplinary approach we are witnessing in language education often resorts to content-focused and problem-based courses, especially in the area of ESP. One of the best options to achieve these aims from a methodological point of view is through problem-based learning in the context of collaborative education. An important argument for content and problem-based learning is its ability to generate a transformation in language learners' understanding of the world and the new challenges we have to live up to. Also, we need to create learning environments which stimulate transformative teaching and learning, together with the students. Thus, collaborative learning can become transformative if teachers make the effort of taking into consideration the students' values and cultural funds of knowledge (MOLL & GREENBERG, 1990). One of the preferred methodologies we have used successfully is

“teachback”, where learners use constructive dialogue to interview each and teach each other what they have learned (PASK, 1976: 19-20). We encourage actual communication and meaningful use of language by giving precedence to practical subject matter options we propose to our students.

Aside from teaching students by means of collaborative learning, we have also been highly involved in collaborative activities with teachers and researchers from other countries. The aims of our on-going research and team work are manifold. On a personal level, we target the acquisition of an increased set of research/teaching competencies, especially transferable ones, leading in the longer-term to more effective ESP contents and value-added courses which provide students with intensive support for their future careers, as well as personal development. On an academic level, we aim at increasing the impact and output of our research by presenting ideas to peers and by finding immediate applications in the language class with our students from Life science-related areas. Moreover, we contribute to the transfer of knowledge by forming and maintaining new networks of transdisciplinary cooperation with partners activating in higher education from Poland, Portugal, Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and UK, so as to ensure knowledge transfer, creation of professional networks, and enhanced cooperation between academic researchers who are interested in English teaching with wider implications.

At the same time, we hope to bring our contribution to the internationalisation of higher education and to increasing its societal relevance. Finally, the English for Specific Purposes course is explicitly designed with the aim of contributing to the knowledge-based society and to the enrichment of the global human capital. Having this aim in mind, the language class is probably the optimal environment for setting these energies into motion and enabling students to interconnect meaningfully and effectively through appropriate communication with others. In this ecosystemic paradigm, we view learners as participants interconnected in the web of life and in life processes, among which communication is deemed essential. Therefore, EFL classes enable students to develop competences required for optimal communication in a sustainable society, focusing above all on human growth.

Among interdisciplinary theories focusing on ecological education as part of the web of life, FRITJOF CAPRA (1997) highlights the imperative of a paradigm change in perceiving the interconnectedness of living systems and acting with respect towards it. Communities, including the “learning communities” under discussion, are complex systems based on communication and interaction as much as any ecosystem. Starting with the educational system, which is part of the crisis of distorted perception generated by the logic of individualism, the ecological crisis we are facing can be seen as a crisis in the perception of interconnectedness in complex systems, as well as a breakdown of communicative modes. Therefore, it is indispensable to integrate systems education in the curricula of EFL, along with communication strategies focusing on an ecological and ecosystemic standpoint.

Also, in order to achieve our aim of raising the students’ critical awareness, learners have to become familiar with social and cultural contexts which shape our identities and value systems. This aim can be accomplished by building on shared humanistic values, above all through dialogue and freedom of expression. Freire proposes cooperation and dialogical action – dialogics – as matrices for education and cultural synthesis (FREIRE, 2000: 87, 125). Genuine communication about the major issues facing humankind can only be addressed through open dialogue, which is of the essence, as “without communication there can be no true education” (FREIRE, 2000: 93). Thus, by building connections through dialogue, education can overcome the dehumanization of both students and teachers, as well as the commodification outlook on

education (FREIRE, 2000: 43). Instead, a synergistic approach to education has the potential of transforming the world through the co-creation of knowledge, from a humanist point of view.

As social networks of communication unfold in communities, they generate meanings, which in turn produce new communications, in a feedback loop which is ultimately conducive to a shared belief/value system. Culture is seen as a community, but also as an interconnected network, where partaking depends on communicating sustainably with others, based on the feedback exchanged in continuous loops, not in isolation. The major problem in educational systems can be summed up as our endemic lack of awareness of these interdependent connections in the “web of life” (CAPRA, 1997). Traditional quantitative growth and linear thinking must be replaced by ecoliteracy as an indicator of awareness of the global network which is essentially recycled in feedback loops. Sustainable education, from this point of view, can be equated to a growing understanding of interactive dynamics, as we learn to communicate ecologically. In this framework, learners essentially learn to collaborate together in mutual respect in the process of learning how to be a human being and how to live with others deferentially.

From the perspective of adding value to the learning content, we have to discriminate between knowing what and knowing how. While it is important to make learning more applied, it is also relevant to understand the meaning of value in itself and avoid the reduction of teaching to lower-level realities. MICHAEL POLANYI (1958) makes this point in challenging rigid positivism and empiricism which are devoid of value, and by promoting the concept of “personal knowledge”. This perspective is useful in that it helps students learn how to discriminate genuine knowledge from the irrelevant flow of information by building on their shared value system. Having in view that personal experience and many other variables also impact scientific inquiry, general understanding, and perspectives on the world, we dismiss the split between the humanities and science (*ibid.*), which should not disregard the human factor. Cultural values and the socially-embedded aspects of communication continue to have great relevance in language in language teaching and learning, leading to a higher ecological awareness which is pivotal in all its meanings. From the standpoint of an axiological pedagogy, we have found points of contact with BOGUSŁAWSKA (2018), a distinguished Polish researcher whose effort to implement an “extended educational paradigm” also corresponds to what we conceive of as meaningful or “mindful” education (BOGUSŁAWSKA, 2015).

The cultural and ethical aspect is also incorporated in the teaching materials we have developed for teaching English for specific purposes. The ecological crisis the world is facing calls for the necessity of implementing eco-critical thinking and a far-reaching ecolinguistics outlook within the language class (STIBBE, 2005). ELT and ESP materials have long capitalized on cultural values, setting learners in motion towards critical stances. ESP materials for students in areas related to the life sciences provide further empirical, conceptual and practical grounds for incorporating moral and cultural values into English language materials. Therefore, the design and use of English language materials take into consideration culturally diverse contexts, within the framework of ecology.

Textbooks contain texts as representational samples of value systems, which may be deemed a “hidden curriculum” (MCGRATH, 2002; SNYDER, 1970). Among other aspects we have highlighted, we also pay attention to the way cultural content and specific activities have the potential to promote cultural awareness through the choice of teaching materials. For this reason, the design of our ESP textbooks and courses has been corroborated with a variety of sources, one of which we would like to mention, as an acknowledgement of the valuable work of dr. Arran Stibbe, Professor of Ecological Linguistics at the University of Gloucestershire and whose contribution to the International Ecolinguistics Association we thoroughly

appreciate and recommend to ecolinguistically-minded researchers. The Association's website (*see* Stibbe) proposes valuable tools for the benefit of researchers, which we have also found extremely helpful as teachers of English for Special Purposes interested in aspects of ecological awareness.

Finally, intercultural communicative skills are also supportive of collaboration across boundaries and English as the new lingua franca of science can be an excellent medium for acquiring this type of expertise. Along with other transferable competencies which can be considered "soft skills" (SCHULTZ, 2008), intercultural skill are also an essential learning outcome in the education for cooperation. On the global market, the need to work collaboratively with people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds requires intercultural awareness and appeals to the higher universal values of humanity. For all these reasons, we believe in the relevance of transmitting cultural, ecolinguistic, and universal values by means of an enhanced approach to English language teaching. Thus, education research goes hand in hand with these transformative methodologies and should readily be applied in our language classrooms.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion reinforces the need to develop an axiological dimension as a guide for our educational activities, which are also reflected in our theoretical research and extended as applications in the English class. Our joint research methodology can unify the results of our pedagogical projects through the ecolinguistic approach to English language communication that we deem valuable. We hope to develop the emancipatory potential of this framework as a tool which may enable students to acquire critical awareness and help them understand the ecological contexts shaping our reality. The Constructivist paradigm also confirms our working hypothesis that the purpose of educational research has a higher social relevance. These approaches are meant to be supportive of the actual learning environment, which is interactive, dialogic, and takes into consideration the larger socio-cultural context.

The multimodal framework of our joint projects substantiates the belief in collaborative learning, as well as cooperative research, in interdisciplinary and ecological approaches to communication. Our holistic and humanistic perspectives avoid reductionist methodologies which tend to narrow down fields of research, points of contact, or the co-creative potential of learning a foreign language. This approach empowers English language learners to activate their higher human potential by acquiring principles which can also be applied to other learning settings or disciplines. Finally, our language-in-context model integrates English for Specific Purposes with ecological imperatives and social requirements for improved communication, within the holistic biosphere.

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