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ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Although there is an abundance of theoretical approaches that serve as theoretical lenses of researchers in Ukraine nowadays, most of them focus on cognitive aspects of phenomena under study. However, any educational processes happen in certain contexts, which play an important role from the beginning until the very outcome or a final product. Therefore, there is a need for a holistic theoretical approach that would embrace both cognitive and social aspects of the matter under study in a certain context. This presentation offers an introduction of an ecological perspective, which might be used as a theoretical framework and afford an in-depth understanding and analysis of the skill-centered education and preparation of professionals in Ukraine with an emphasis on and application in foreign language teaching and learning.

Ecological Perspective: Introduction

The ecological perspective is «neither a theory nor a method. It is a way of thinking and a way of acting» (van Lier, 2004, p. 3). As a theoretical framework, it draws on the concept of «ecology,» borrowed from biology, which may be defined as a combination of phenomena in their context with all interactions that create the context itself (van Lier, 2004). The ecological perspective is holistic in its

nature and embraces social and cognitive factors and processes. From this perspective, a learner is an active agent in the environment, which is full of signs, meanings, processes, and affordances that is, opportunities in the environment (van Lier, 2004). A learner first notices\perceives objects, agents, actions, etc. in the environment, interprets their affordance(s), and chooses to act (or not) accordingly. Therefore, from the ecological perspective, one of the primary goals of teaching is to help students engage in affordance networks (Barab & Roth, 2006). In foreign language teaching and learning, this need is to consider and create linguistic and non-linguistic affordances, enhance language learners' perceptions and employment of these affordances, and facilitate students' language learning through interaction (Lafford, 2009; van Lier, 2004).

Tudor (2001) was one of the first who pointed out that one of the challenges that language teachers face in the classroom is differences in teaching contexts. In his opinion, it is impossible to state that a certain activity or classroom practice will lead to a certain result-either success or failure-in learning outcomes because of differences in the context and varied perceptions of affordances by language learners (van Lier, 2004). According to Tudor (2001), a language teacher cannot simply follow the instructional manual for some technology tool, apply it in the same way in every class, and expect to have the same learning outcomes. On the contrary, what language teachers need and tend to do on a regular basis is creating and adjusting learning materials and planning their classes, taking into account learners', parents', and administrators' expectations.

Ecological Perspective in Research on Language Teaching and Learning

The ecological perspective is a relatively new approach (van Lier, 2004); therefore, there is still a scarcity of studies where it was employed as a theoretical framework. What

follows is the review of some of these studies with the focus on the findings and implications that are related to language teaching and can inform foreign language researchers, practitioners, and administrators in Ukraine.

In addition to seminal works by van Lier (2000; 2002; 2004), there have been several studies that explore different aspects of language teaching and learning from the ecological perspective. For example, Hu (2005) investigated differences and similarities in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Chinese context. The researcher studied the extent to which communicative language teaching (CLT) had been implemented in teaching EFL and contextual factors that influenced CLT. His findings reveal the gap between the officially adopted methodology and the reality of teaching languages in China. Importantly, contextual factors turned out to have a major influence on language teaching. He points out the influence of varying availability of authentic English-language materials, different beliefs about the use and value of English in various regions of China, and the Chinese culture of learning in terms of expectations, perceptions, preferences, and behaviors. In the implications of the study, the researcher argues for the employment of the ecological perspective in teaching EFL, which would afford consideration of the context in language teaching and flexibility of instructional practices in different parts of the country.

In addition to Hu's (2005) argument for the need of appropriating the ecological perspective to teaching EFL, Rubdy (2009) claims the necessity to employ the ecological approach for reconceptualizing English as a pluralized global language. The researcher highlights advantages of employing the ecological perspective in terms of possibilities to start a dialogue between the global and the local and reclaim the local identities of ex-colonial countries. She argues in favor of immediate actions, emphasizing the role of culture in teaching English as an international language. In order to

build the argument, Rubdy discusses the top-down processes of globalization, the shift of power and suppression of the local forms of knowledge, and the world prevalence of English in terms of dominance, divisiveness, and difference. Finally, she discusses the cultures of inferiority, dependence, pragmatism, passivity, and elitism.

Hornberger and Vaish (2009) discuss the paradox of teaching English «as a tool of decolonization for multilingual populations» who try to get access to the global economy (p. 305). The researchers employ the ecological perspective in order to analyze multilingual contexts in Singapore, India, and South Africa, multilingual policy, and school practices in these countries. The ecological perspective allowed for the analysis of language use and school practices in terms of teaching languages and equity of local language development in comparison to the spread of English. The findings of the study reveal inequity in the development of various languages in Singapore, India, and South Africa. As an implication of their discussion, the researchers discuss the need of cherishing native local languages along with teaching English at schools through multilingual classroom practices. Employing the ecological perspective when looking at teaching English in different countries of the world allows for considering affordances of the environment or context and providing opportunities for the local to reclaim their identities and preserve local languages.

Finally, Hayes (2008) studied motivation of seven Thai teachers of English based on the contextual factors. The researcher employed the ecological approach and positioned teachers as active social beings in the environment. The author chose a life history research approach in order to analyze the meaning that teachers attach to their decisions, beliefs, etc. in their context. This allowed for getting an insight into Thai teachers' motivation to become teachers of English and the influence of the context on this moti-

vation. The findings of the study show that there were two broad categories of contextual factors that influenced teachers' motivation—their own schooling as well as economic and sociocultural factors. The participants shared that their positive experiences during school years and/or desire to continue learning English as a subject matter contributed to their motivation to become teachers of English. The view of teaching as a female profession, lack of professional opportunities in certain geographic areas, and tendency to become teachers among people from lower-economic backgrounds turned out to be influential in terms of motivation to teaching (Hayes, 2008).

Future Directions of Research on Foreign Language Teaching and Learning from the Ecological Perspective in Ukraine

Based on the review of a few seminal research studies on language teaching and learning from the ecological perspective, I offer a list of several future directions that may contribute to research on foreign language teaching and learning in Ukraine. They are as follows:

- foreign language teaching and learning in monolingual, homogeneous classrooms with the focus on context, affordances, interaction, engagement, and participation;
- foreign language learners' and teachers' negotiation of self and identities in classroom and online contexts;
- attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of pre-service and in-service foreign language teachers in various contexts.

In conclusion, this paper offers an introduction of the ecological perspective as a holistic theoretical framework that once employed could afford an in-depth understanding of foreign language teaching and learning and preparation of professionals in Ukraine. The review of several empirical studies with the ecological perspective as a theoretical lens might help researchers in Ukraine transfer some aspects and findings of these studies to Ukrainian realities. Finally,

I offer a list of broad future research directions in foreign language teaching and learning from the ecological perspective.

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ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД К ИЗУЧЕНИЮ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА

Аннотация

Статья посвящена экологическому подходу в преподавании и изучении иностранного языка. В статье автор отмечает, что на сегодня, несмотря на существование множества теоретических подходов, используемых как теоретические линзы исследователями в Украине, большинство из них сосредоточены на когнитивных аспектах изучаемых явлений и усиливают необходимость целостного теоретического подхода, который будет охватывать как когнитивный, так и социальный аспекты изучаемого вопроса в рамках определенного контекста. Автор статьи предлагает введение экологического подхода, который может быть использован в качестве теоретической основы и может позволить глубокое понимание и анализ образования и подготовки специалистов Украины с ориентацией на навыки и акцентом на преподавании и изучении иностранного языка. На основе обзора научных исследований по вопросам экологической точки зрения преподавания и изучения, автор предлагает перечень нескольких направлений, которые в будущем могут внести свой вклад в исследование преподавания иностранного языка в Украине: преподавание и изучение иностранных языков в одноязычных, однородных классах с акцентом на содержании, возможностях взаимодействия, привлечении и участии; обсуждение преподавателями и студентами иностранных языков, самоопределение и существование в аудитории и он-лайн; взгляды, убеждения и опыт к педагогической деятельности преподавателей иностранных языков в различных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: *экологический подход, преподавания иностранного языка, изучение иностранного языка, направление, подготовка специалистов.*

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ЕКОЛОГІЧНИЙ ПІДХІД ДО ВИВЧЕННЯ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

Анотація

Стаття присвячена екологічному підходу у навчанні і вивченні іноземної мови. У статті автор зазначає, що на сьогодні, попри існування безлічі теоретичних підходів, які використовуються як теоретичні лінзи дослідниками в Україні, більшість з них зосереджені на когнітивних аспектах досліджуваних явищ, що підсилює необхідність цілісного теоретичного підходу, який буде охоплювати як когнітивний, так і соціальний аспекти досліджуваного питання у межах певного контексту. Автор статті пропонує введення екологічного підходу, який може бути використаний у якості теоретичної основи та може дозволити глибоке розуміння й аналіз освіти і підготовки фахівців України з орієнтацією на навички та акцентом на викладанні та вивченні іноземної мови. На основі огляду наукових досліджень з питань екологічної точки зору викладання та вивчення, автор пропонує перелік декількох напрямків, які у майбутньому можуть внести свій вклад у дослідження викладання іноземної мови в Україні: викладання та вивчення іноземних мов в одномовних, однорідних класах з акцентом на змісті, можливостях, взаємодії, залученні та участі; обговорення викладачами іноземних мов та студентами самовизначення та існування в аудиторії та он-лайн; погляди, переконання і досвід допедагогічної та педагогічної діяльності викладачів іноземних мов у різних контекстах.

Ключові слова: *екологічний підхід, викладання іноземної мови, вивчення іноземної мови, напрямки, підготовка фахівців.*