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## ECOLINGUISTIC QUALITIES OF THE OPTIMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at language learning from an ecological perspective, which highlights the co-relational nature of educational processes. In language learning ecology, ESP practice develops organically, as learners interact and cooperate among peers. Some essential concepts this approach focuses on are developing dialogical interaction and building ecologically holistic environments for learning. The study surveys these basic principles of the ecological approach from a theoretical, as well as practical perspective, using experimental-informed data from our shared teaching contexts. The outlook we suggest puts forward a complex system of ecological learning as a catalyst for proficiency and achievement of high quality in English language education. Incorporating specialty topics and qualitative skills facilitates the learners' integration in the multi-disciplinary society awaiting them. Therefore, professional language and interpersonal or "soft" skills are essential for ESP learners in an ecological learning framework which holistically tackles different areas of competency in correlation with meaningful knowledge about the world.

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

### 1. Introduction

Continuing our previous study, this paper further explores the prerequisites for 1<sup>st</sup> level University students to become highly skilled in English for Special Purposes by coalescing recent approaches to language learning/teaching, among which ecolinguistics is especially highlighted. Our study aims at finding optimal ways and sharing best practices for the maximisation

of learners' communicative proficiency, in relation to developing other relevant aspects, such as social and systemic or transversal competences. Our case in point – that of the ESP course for our students of Life Sciences – affords the possibility of extension to any type of language acquisition, and, hopefully, to any kind of educational undertaking in general.

One goal of this research is to raise awareness of new ways of language learning, while reclaiming relevant aspects suggested by proponents of the ecolinguistic paradigm shift. In order to increase learner proficiency to a higher level, we put forward a system

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integrating multi-modal and personalized resources, peer interaction and dialogical, collaborative tasks. The ESP curricula and learning materials are correlated to actual needs and customized to fit the learners' real interests, thereby assisting them to achieve progress, as well as personal growth.

The outlook on the educational experience this paper articulates also shares common ground with what Bogusławska (2018) refers to as a "culture of consciousness" in her effort to implement functional educational models (Bogusławska, 2018). This would entail the emergence of an "extended educational paradigm" that we also regard as meaningful or "mindful" education (Bogusławska, 2015). Likewise, proponents of this new paradigm in language teaching and learning bring arguments for an ecological methodology which is rooted in a wider, more comprehensive worldview. The social context and interaction patterns in which the learners engage are central to an ecolinguistic understanding of learning (Van Lier, 2000).

For these purposes, the present paper lays emphasis on the ecological approach to teaching, considering its practical implications for the learning context in relation to quality. Ecolinguistics has grown to be a platform with copious ramifications, the most widely employed being ecological discourse analysis. A more comprehensive literature review on this topic is available in Fratila's *On Language and Ecology* (2006). More recently, research has migrated towards the field of language teaching, providing educators with an enhanced understanding of the learning experience seen in a new light. This research looks into several aspects shared by the new pedagogy and the study of ecology, focusing on aspects such as the learning environment, quality, collaborative learning, interaction, and the emphasis upon relationships rather than objects (van Lier, 2004).

## 2. Material and method

This study is an extension of a collaborative project we started in 2016, as material developers of ESP courses and English teachers at the BUASVM University "King Michael I of Romania" from Timișoara (Romania) and the University of Kragujevac (Serbia). This joint research aims to highlight teaching strategies relying on personal growth and seeking to accomplish quality in teaching, as well as designing the ESP course support. The practical and experimental discussion we propose takes into consideration 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 et al., 2011) and *English for Agricultural Engineers* (Dragoescu & Coroamă, 2016). In further extending this research, we joined forces 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 we deem conducive to quality enhancement, in view of the current sociocultural demands. The research we have conducted in collaboration is based on several years of academic work in the language learning environment, as a result of which we were able to incorporate both practice and theory. Moreover, our approach to language teaching attempts to overcome such disjunctions, as these different aspects of education should not be mutually exclusive. Therefore, our research method is on the one hand grounded in theory, but also reinforced by practical experience. Our methodological approach relies fundamentally on ecolinguistics from a theoretical point of view, which we try to apply as practically as possible. This approach is viewed as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, to other mainstream language learning paradigms, among which cognitive linguistics should be specified.

Several approaches to language learning are also taken into consideration, focusing on the practical implications for the learning context in relation to quality.

The leading ecological paradigm in language education is approached in relation with some other informative theories like competence-based learning and postmethod. On the whole, it is the ecolinguistic framework that ensures the most comprehensive background to our research, as it can be perceived more inclusively than any other singled out method. The underpinning concept of the ecological paradigm in language teaching/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 in mutual correlation, as ecological features of teaching and learning. Instead of pursuing selective aspects of learning or teaching, the ecological approach makes reference to complex ecosystems and encourages researchers to investigate the dynamics of these accumulation processes 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.

### 3. Results and discussion

Current research provides a variety of useful methodologies for our research, which starts by exploring competency-based language teaching and the communicative approaches – cooperative language learning, content-based instruction, and task-based language teaching. This discussion is followed by examples of theory-informed strategies for eliciting spoken discourse. Areas in need of further investigation are suggested, as well as the possible drawbacks and limitations of the postmethod trend.

More recently, ESP methodologies have been focusing on achieving communicative proficiency in second language acquisition

rather than on mere mastery of structures. Developing *soft skills* and promoting interaction are essential to achieving an ecolinguistic paradigm of language learning, with an emphasis on personal development. References to quality in various teaching or learning methodologies include these key elements, which authorizes the association between quality and the ecological approach to language acquisition. Our research regards 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.

In order to put our research hypotheses to test, we set out to identify the most outstanding features of effective ESP learning with a view to including them in our routine of best practices, with our students' benefit in mind. Our aim is to contribute to the wide-ranging development of language learning and to facilitate the growth of the acclaimed "culture of consciousness" (Bogusławska, 2018). In line with the ecolinguistic paradigm of language teaching, some of the primary criteria we have identified are: establishing interaction on an open platform, *i.e.* the class viewed as an "ecosystem" or a "classroom ecology" (Creese & Martin, 2003), 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.

From an ecolinguistic point of view, the *class ecosystem* (Thornbury, 2010) displays the qualities of mutuality and collaborative learning in order to solve problems, based on the idea that the educational process is a "life process", as proposed by Bogusławska

(2015). The author also emphasizes the difference between the *optimal learner profile* and the *minimal learner profile*, which she views as dependent to the effectiveness of the learner's self-regulatory mechanisms in relation to the environment, whereas the minimal type remains caught in defective mechanisms (Bogusławska, 2015).

When students are allowed to work in groups more autonomously, the ESP course displays an additional degree of interactivity. Thus, the proposed working methodology assists students to achieve enhanced interpersonal skills and improve their capacity to work in teams, to adapt to other group members in new situations, while negotiating meaning and opinions. Among the various types of language practice, Thornbury identifies controlled or mechanical practice, in contrast to free production and meaningful communicative practice, with an emphasis on the latter (2006).

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 is conducive to the creation of such a "linguistic ecosystem". 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" (Breen, 2001), displaying interaction patterns among learners and learning facilitators. By the same token, the language class becomes "an arena of subjective and intersubjective realities which [...] continually specify and mould the activities of teaching and learning (Breen, 2001). Breen's ecological approach to classroom experience highlights the diverse nature and the complexity of

interactions taking place within the language classroom. His "coral garden" metaphor encapsulates the idea that classes naturally develop complex social cultures, while language learning is experienced as an emergent, reciprocal experience (Breen, 2001). The idea of a dynamic classroom environment which is constructed by teachers and learners in cooperation implies the eco-paradigmatic interpretation of learning as an organic life process.

In terms of acquisition of resources based on interaction, the naturalist approach of postmethod introduced by Krashen (1985) focuses on *comprehensible input* as the essential element for acquiring language. From this standpoint, the prerequisites of foreign language acquisition are *meaningful interaction* in the target language, which is perceived as *natural communication*, in which the concern is primarily conveying and understanding messages rather than focusing on the form of speaker utterances (Krashen, 2004). Natural communication occurs when speakers are focused not on the form of their utterances, but on the communicative act and the actual meaning of what is being said. From this perspective, acquisition is seen as opposed to *learning*, which is the product of formal instruction as a conscious process giving rise to conscious knowledge "about" the language (*e.g.* knowledge of grammar rules), which is less important than authentic *acquisition*. According to Krashen (1985), the input hypothesis is concerned with acquisition and learners progress when they receive second language input which is one step beyond their current level of linguistic competence.

By the same token, the interaction hypothesis formulated by Long (1983) suggests that language acquisition is assisted by the use of language in interaction. Accordingly, the comprehensible input is significantly more effective when learners are willing to negotiate for meaning and they share the mutual benefit of learning. The "comprehensible input" accumulated by receivers consists in the new items in the

target language that they are not yet able to produce but can still understand. This may comprise context presentation, explanation, rewording or paraphrasing, using cues and negotiating meaning. Whenever the meaning is successfully conveyed, we may speak of a learning experience.

This is the case especially when students are interested in the subject and they make use of the target language as a medium of expressing themselves and conveying meaning. Thus, ESP teaching is conducive to language proficiency when the facilitator of learning presents explanations in such a manner that learners are interested in and largely understand the comprehensible input. Consequently, the classroom naturally becomes a stress-free environment appropriate for language acquisition with the students' co-participation, as their conscious efforts are focused on the subject matter rather than the medium of exchange. Central to this attempt is the understanding high achievers have of the fact that learning is an active and interactive process.

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.

As regards the teacher's role, another reliable indicator of quality in language learning and teaching is the extent to which the teacher acts as a "facilitator" of learning. This view implies that teachers do not directly cause learning, but rather ensure that the conditions for learning are being met. According to Thornbury, "the learner should not be seen as the object of the verb to teach, but the subject of the verb to learn" (2006). Teachers merely provide appropriate learning resources and select suitable activities, as they create opportunities for language acquisition. Moreover, the role taken by teachers in the language classroom impacts not only the quality of the teaching discourse, but also the patterns of classroom interaction from a more comprehensive perspective (Thornbury, 2006). Consistently, the quality of interaction tends to depend on the nature of the task, its structural formulation and the outcomes textbook developers had in mind (Thornbury, 2006:107). It has been our purpose when designing our ESP textbooks to stimulate the learners' attention, to continuously produce a communicative response, and to engage them in genuine, mindful exchange.

Achieving quality is also one of the basic tenets of "mindful" education. For that reason, our research proposes a discussion of quality mediated through reciprocal relations which gradually integrates comprehensible input. As educators, we feel responsible to enact standards of quality in teaching/learning, which are supported by a well-considered set of standards. More specifically, quality in ESP practice has been articulated as the application of a teaching method which can be validated on account of its elusive effectiveness, based on the fact that learners presumably become proficient in the targeted subject matter. Richards and Rodgers (2001) discuss the notion of "method" along several aspects: the syllabus (the manner in which the learning content is organized), learner roles (grouping patterns), the teacher's role and influence, and teaching resources which are selected in relation to

the method. One concern the paper addresses is the selection of authentic materials when designing ESP textbooks, for which we suggest some practical applications.

From the ecological viewpoint, it is essential for teaching routines to ensure a satisfactory transfer from an unnatural, controlled environment typical of formalist education to life-like dynamic and autonomous interaction. If the knowledge provider (teacher) controls all the language produced in the learning environment, students will not be able to make the transition from language-learning to actual use of language. This problem can be solved by learning interactively, by developing relations with other speakers, with the teacher assuming the role of a manager of interaction. While learners are allowed to deal with the irregular nature of language, to experiment with their abilities, and try to find variants to compensate for knowledge gaps, the teacher's role narrows down to gap-filling feedback.

Another element required for the promotion of quality in the learning experience is setting the proper goals. Authors seem to be largely in agreement that effective teachers are those who achieve goals they set for themselves. Anderson finds that effective teachers are aware and consistently achieve the goals they set for themselves (1991). Success is also determined by the teachers' own proficiency and teaching skills, as well as 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 wide-ranging features: technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, personal qualities, and interpersonal skills (Brown, 2001). The inspirational teacher who is also a prototype of complexity becomes motivating for the students' own achievement.

Pondering on what works better to motivate students and to improve the quality of ESP instruction, we looked at the underlying

reasons for learning. We must consider if the learner is learning in order to use English or rather using English in order to learn it, the latter being the recommended strategy (Howatt, 1984). This entails that the learning content be modified in ways that make it more accessible to learners. ESP lessons become more motivating when the content they deliver is grounded in the relevant concerns of actual learners in the classroom, rather than artificial information typical of a conventional course book. On these grounds, we have personalized our teaching resources in order to make them more approachable to actual learners. Some of the most efficient types of instructional material we employed in the ESP course proved to be discussion points, information-gap readings, role-plays, and interactive games. These applied functional activities are targeted at preparing students for the real communicative situations they are likely to encounter outside the classroom environment. ESP is specifically an area of language learning which prepares students for real-life use of language. For this reason, acquiring proper terminology is essential in understanding key concepts and becoming professional in a given area of expertise.

In this respect, it is equally important to develop the learners' "performative competence" or "competence for practice" within ESP classes. This requires achieving procedural knowledge and focusing on practices rather than formal aspects (Canagarajah, 2014). 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.

This takes us to the impending discussion of competence-based learning, which is extremely relevant to the learning outcomes.

As part of the educational process, teachers articulate anticipated learning outcomes in correlation to building learner competences. Their formulation is contingent on the students' needs, but also on social aspects like needs of the professional environment students will soon face in their particular field of interest. For that reason, the kind of competences we must have in mind in our special ESP case represent a dynamic combination of specific and generic competencies, including knowledge, understanding, skills, and abilities, according to the object of educational programmes. While acknowledging the importance of developing subject-specific knowledge and skills as the basis for academic degree programmes, we would like to stress the fact that generic competences or transferable skills should also be given due consideration if we are to achieve quality in education. This type of competence is becoming more and more relevant for preparing students for their future role in society in terms of employability, citizenship, and more generally in terms of developing a professional quality culture. Generic competences include instrumental competences (e.g. cognitive, methodological, technological, or linguistic abilities); systemic competences (e.g. abilities in relation to whole systems, entailing a combination of understanding, awareness, and knowledge; reference to prior acquisition of the required competences); and interpersonal competences (e.g. individual abilities, especially social skills like interaction and co-operation).

Among these, the interpersonal competences are probably the most instrumental for achieving the aims of ecolinguistic education and also of great relevance to English acquisition, in our special case. Thus, interactive learning styles and patterns are addressed by our training method in the context of ecologically sustainable classes. For this purpose, we planned several types of activities to introduce interactivity, an aspect which we initially assessed as not

sufficiently trained. Finally, creating an agency-rich environment can stimulate learners by facilitating occasions for them to work as members of a learning community on tasks they find motivating, within their area of special interest (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). This is likely to lead to the institution of a type of learning encouraging environment.

In the light of these considerations, a conspicuously cohesive element along all the issues covered above is essentially the use of interaction, among other "eco-tools" which help build the optimal learning outcome. Based on our educational experience as ESP practitioners and researchers, we tested empirical evidence which we compiled from the classroom in order to improve our eco-tools as much as possible. This verified our assumption that optimal quality can be achieved by using a comparatively more effective ecolinguistic teaching toolkit, as mediated by our students of ESP. We plan to employ these specific tools in order to further improve the learners' functional communicative skills and to enhance language learning through collaborative interaction along the lines of quality requirements.

The research results consistently indicate that a major pre-requisite for ensuring quality and success in the foreign language learning experience is the attitude we manage to create in the recipients of education. The way practitioners, promoters of education, and curricula developers envision the learning process is equally important. We must strive for a holistic, concerted, and integrative awareness of ecolinguistic education in the *knowledge society*.

#### 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 specific purposes. In establishing quality criteria, we have relied on several comparative frameworks from the communicative approach to the current ecolinguistic school of thought. 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 & Rodgers, 2001). For instance, communicative methods developed valuable tools which may be put to use for the benefit of ecologically-minded ESP practitioners. Task-based theory is informative as to how to conceive tasks to guide L2 acquisition optimally, even though we may choose to modify and adapt the nature of tasks to new realities. What our approach pleads for, in the end, is to bring all possible approaches together and derive benefit from all the "nutritious" sediments of the past. This is how we interpret a rigorously ecolinguistic perspective on ESP learning. However, a major area in need of further investigation consists of the limitations of the postmethod approach. It should essentially be viewed as a more flexible position in relation to teaching rather than a disengagement from quality, given the tendency to avoid correcting spontaneous language production.

By declining formalist traditions of English language acquisition, we do not disregard them altogether, but consider some of the practices pertaining to these methodologies in a new light – that of the eco-linguistic perspective. 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.

Our inter-academic research and the consideration of our mission as ESP teachers bring us to the conclusion that the use of collaborative learning and communicative strategies is in direct connection to achieving learner proficiency. Enhancing levels of language competency to a greater extent, as we have proposed at the outset, can optimally be achieved through mediating and integrating all useful methodologies, so long as these are reconciled with the real learners' needs, as they have been identified upon initial needs analysis. We hope to overcome restrictive dialectical perspectives on language learning and instead broaden our research approach so as to include various teaching methods in a complementary, not mutually exclusive, manner.

Finally, the practicality of our endeavour also lies in the proposition of extending not only multidisciplinary perspectives, but also enlarging the learning environment to include participants from multilingual backgrounds with the advent of international mobility programmes.

In conclusion, we trade a formalist practice of ESP teaching and learning for a more comprehensive view of language which emphasizes quality and authenticity, replacing isolated aspects of grammar or vocabulary. Our working question of how these aspects can all be qualitatively and coherently attuned for optimal results entails taking into consideration each of the proposed strategies for quality. Thus, the optimal attitude towards learning a foreign language can be achieved by building upon the learners' personality and interests in their special field of study. The genuine quality of the teaching experience resides, in all likelihood, essentially in understanding the importance of these aspects. Central to the attempt to develop an ecolinguistics approach to language learning has been the discussion of what it means to achieve

optimal levels of quality and consistent progress in ESP acquisition. This has been uncovered by examining relevant aspects that various methodologies have also

contributed to the area, which seem to be inherent to the success of a qualitative language learning experience.

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