

Complexity Theory and translanguaging as pedagogy for ESL learner empowerment

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Abstract

Recent theories in second language education have highlighted the learner as a social being, who has agency and takes an active role in the language learning process. One recent theory of the social turn in second language education that is of relevance to ESL teaching is Complexity Theory (CT). In this article, we briefly explain how CT and the concept of affordance relate to the role of the teacher and the learners in the ESL classroom. We then discuss what teaching ESL through a CT lens involves and argue that translanguaging as pedagogy can empower ESL learners and transform the ESL classroom into a more equitable and inclusive space.

Key words: complexity theory, translanguaging, affordance, communicative repertoire, ESL pedagogy, second language theory

Introduction

Second language education (SLE) has witnessed a significant shift in the past decades, from an emphasis on studying second language development as a pure cognitive activity to examining it with a social focus centred on the learner (Thomas, 2013). Second language learning used to be seen as a purely mental process, one in which the learner would process words, grammar, morphemes and phonemes in a new language (Myles 2013), as if the learner's mind was primarily a computer processor that served to categorize, process, save,



and retrieve data. With the social turn in SLE (Block, 2003), scholars have stressed the importance of examining language use in a given social context as well as the extent to which language is learned through social interactions (Larsen-Freeman 2018; Myles 2013). This social turn can only be represented in the ESL classroom if teachers view the learner's presence as that of a social being who is resourceful, has agency, and mediates language learning with peers, texts, and the outside world (Myles, 2013). Learning English no longer demands that learners participate solely in grammar drills or retain lists of vocabulary words, which may hold no meaning to the learner, but were common teaching practices in the early years of SLE. Instead, learning English is a non-linear and dynamic process, and teaching practices need to offer opportunities for affordances so learners develop agency and empowerment. Teaching and learning English in the social turn is therefore complex. This article first discusses Complexity Theory (CT) (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), an SLE theory that is relevant for ESL teachers who wish to shift their teaching into making language socially relevant for learners. It highlights the concept of affordance, one of CT's main dimensions, and provides pedagogical orientations that focus on empowering the ESL learner and creating a space that is equitable and inclusive where all learners are represented.

Complexity Theory and the concept of affordance

Prior to examining the main dimensions of CT, it is important to note how language learning is conceptualized in this theory. In CT, language is learned as an emergent process and not necessarily because it is overtly taught by the teacher. Thus, teaching English may require that teachers shift how they think about language and the power they exert over the learner's language development. One of the main important actions that the teacher needs to take is to provide learners with opportunities for English learning to emerge so language is developed, which can be done through the provision of a number of interactions (Larsen-Freeman, 2012). ESL teachers should not expect that learning is linear; for example, it is not because learners have been introduced to a somewhat linear sequence of grammar concepts such as the simple present, the present continuous, and the simple past, that they will have learned these concepts entirely. This may seem obvious; after all, most ESL teachers know it takes several attempts and extensive practice before learners are actually able to start using these grammar concepts in impromptu speech. What is new in CT is that learning a language is complex—but not complicated—and is based on the premises of affordance (Piccardo, 2017).

The notion of affordance is of particular importance in ESL teaching through a CT lens as it requires learners' engagement with content, representation, and understandings from the learners' viewpoint. That is, what the teacher presents in class may or may not be learned by the student as the learning process will depend on how meaningful representations are made. Thus, a single affordance can offer different learning



opportunities to different learners (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Van Lier, 2010). For example, a picture of nature could drive an ESL learner to make comparisons of types of trees in Canada and other countries while for another learner, it could pick their interest in how Canada takes environmental measures to preserve its forests. In other words, learners build a relationship with the opportunity offered by the teachers, which creates affordances for ESL learning and can spark learners' interests in learning vocabulary and grammar through meaningful connections. It is as if there were several doors from which to choose, and it is the learners' decisions which door(s) to open. As learners go through these doors, learning occurs.



Socha, A. (2016). Doors choices choose open decision opportunity [Image]. *Pixabay*.
<https://pixabay.com/photos/doors-choices-choose-open-decision-1767563/>

Learners also demonstrate an affiliation with the context through cognitive processes such as detecting patterns and storing information but also through social skills such as communicating with the teacher, other learners, and their community members. ESL learners' interactions with resources, peers, the social context, and their knowledge of the world create a dynamic and complex image of language learning, and every contribution from learners to the context adds a new affordance that changes the course of learning, which consequently re-organizes itself (Kramsch, 2012). In other words, it is through the multi-trajectories and facets of interactions that language emerges (Larsen-Freeman, 2012), and the prediction of the outcome of interactions becomes impossible, which explains the component of uncertainty in CT (Kramsch, 2012).

ESL teaching through a CT lens

ESL teaching through a CT lens requires that teachers provide affordances for learners to develop agency in their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2019), which may in turn position teachers as facilitators and also learners. Teachers no longer follow teacher-centered practices and do not expect their learners to see them as the sole source of knowledge. In CT, teachers encourage their learners to develop agency by creating and participating in collaborative activities, taking risks, and mediating learning with their peers

and affordances created in the classroom. If ESL learners ask the teacher for information on how to solve a problem, for example, the teacher will not provide the answer right away; the teacher will first invite learners to share what they know about the topic and activate their schemata, and develop a teacher-learner as well as learner-learner research collaboration to find out the best way to solve that problem. That is, learning is mediated and ongoing. The practice of mutual learning is derived from the belief that language cannot be acquired fully or has a final outcome, so language learning is a continuous and perhaps endless process that is always evolving in a complex system (Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

CT takes the pressure off the teacher to be the 'know it all'. In the classroom, teachers can plainly admit that they do not know the meaning of a word or an expression and encourage learners to look it up in monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual dictionaries, check its different uses, and explore more contextual features. For example, if a student asks whether ology is a word or a suffix, since we have many words that ending with ology, such as biology, anthropology, ecology, etc. the teacher can ask other students if they know the answer or consult their dictionaries to answer the question. They can also divide the class into research teams where every team has a goal: Team one can investigate the etymology, history, and evolution of the word; team two can report the multiple meanings associated with the word; team three can create lists of various examples, and team four can focus on the exceptions and interesting facts connected to the word. To conclude the task, the teacher and learners share information through an open discussion in which their findings are reported.

Because language learning is emergent and depends on learner's interests in learning the language, it is helpful if teachers develop an interest in the topics brought on by their learners and their lived experiences because learning is viewed from an ecological stance (Kramsch, 2012). Put differently, the environment of learning is constructed and enriched by what learners draw upon in their lives, backgrounds, imagination, and interests (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). What a learner might say can help the teacher and other learners in developing a new piece of knowledge. For example, considering projects based on a learner's lived experience such as artifacts, visual and textual representations as assignments are the finest representation of contextual learning enrichment. Every learner can investigate and research a different topic and create a unique final product that can serve as an affordance to other learners who might choose to act on it by asking further questions and engaging in meaningful discussions (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

Developing agency and empowering the ESL learner

In CT, learners play a major role in guiding their own learning and developing agency (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). Teachers are not the only ones who make decisions about teaching materials, learning tools, and assessment methods (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) as learning is dependent on learners' lived experiences and how they engage with language. Thus, ESL teachers can take learners' needs and interests into consideration



in the selection of materials, which may be the first step to drive students' own learning (The New School, 2018). Teachers can ask their students to choose the content and the materials of a given topic in a syllabus that has been pre-designed and leave room in their syllabus designated only for student driven learning. By doing so, teachers empower learners by asking them to decide what they want to learn, requiring that they take an active role (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). The teacher may also provide choices regarding assessment: in CT, it is preferred that teachers avoid methods in which ESL learners are compared to native speakers of English. Instead, learners should be evaluated according to what they can achieve, or what they can do, in the language (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). Learners can choose to present what they have learned orally, to write an essay, to create a digital presentation, to design a postcard, or other types. By focusing on what learners can do—or cannot do yet—teachers empower the learners and avoid a deficit model of comparison between native and non-native English performance, which is an unrealistic expectation.

CT and translanguaging practices

Translanguaging, or the use of learners' entire repertoire of languages and cultural resources for meaning making (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2018), is one important pedagogical practice in CT. In the ESL classroom, translanguaging is a pedagogy that is used to assist with language learning by drawing on the learners' repertoire, building knowledge of a new language based on what they already know in their languages (e. g., L1) (Cenoz, 2017). Translanguaging can help learners communicate in, maintain, and develop their heritage languages as well as provide affordances for learning based on learners' lived experiences, identities, and cultures (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). One simple practice that can be embraced by teachers is to allow learners to access their *communicative repertoire*, which is defined as an accumulation of multiple languages and ways of communication (Myles, 2013). By accessing their communicative repertoires, learners invite their teacher to better understand and connect to their culture, history, and values, which can be helpful for teachers in terms of selecting classroom materials that are connected to the learners' lives.

In the ESL classroom, the teacher can encourage learners to bring texts in other languages, make comparisons across languages, and also use their languages in the classroom. Teachers can also create spaces in every lesson in which learners engage in translanguaging or *translanguaging spaces* (Li, 2011). For example, in a study carried out in an English classroom, learners were asked to sketch themselves as a visual representation that embodies their identity as they see it (Galante, 2019). The learners were asked to write and place languages they had previously learned or that they wished to learn in their drawing and discussed what those languages represented to them. These were languages that they had learned with friends and family, at school, on TV, on the Internet, in their communities, while traveling, etc. Such discussions, which were done in English and in learners' languages, allowed them to talk about issues related to identity and



belonging, language hierarchy, language policies in educational institutions, language testing, societal power and status, and linguistic discrimination, among others. Translanguaging pedagogical practices such as this one can help learners feel that they are accepted as they are, which in turn can motivate them to be more invested in their ESL learning.

Another simple translanguaging practice that can be encouraged in the ESL classroom is to get learners to access content, oral and text, in different languages by consulting online dictionaries or apps to engage with vocabulary in different languages by comparing meaning, use, script, and pronunciation. When learners are given the opportunity to share the knowledge of languages they already know and compare this knowledge with English, it transforms the ESL classroom into an inclusive and equitable space where all learners engage in the learning process. Comparing their languages also provides affordances for further learning, which goes beyond English learning to learning about how other languages are represented as well as language diversity.

Conclusion

The social turn in SLE demands a differentiated view of teaching languages with the learner taking an active role and developing agency over their own learning while the teacher offers affordances for learning to take place. One theory that supports this view is CT, through which English is learned based on learners' own motivations and lived experiences. English can only be learned if learners have their identities invested in the learning process and have their communicative repertoire respected and acknowledged as an integral part of their identity. Therefore, through mediating learning with their peers, resources, and the languages in their repertoire, ESL learners can engage in translanguaging practices to advance in the new language. Learning a new language may be a complex phenomenon, but when supported by pedagogy that empowers learners, it can transform the ESL classroom.

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