

Taking English language learning for a walk: some bio-pedagogical considerations for mediating English language learning outside the classroom.

*Llevando el aprendizaje del inglés de paseo: consideraciones biopedagógicas
para mediar el aprendizaje del inglés fuera de las aulas*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to address some considerations for pedagogical strategies that can take English learning outside the classrooms through a perspective based on the principles of bio-pedagogy and the teacher mediator that focus on the development of the human being from the culture of love, respect, cooperation, co-inspiration, and care for the other; and that emphasize the importance of creativity, emotions and above all the individual as a key player in the process. Likewise, this article exposes the important role of online technology by proposing some pedagogical mediations for teaching English outside the classroom.

KEYWORDS:

bio-pedagogy,
mediation,
technology,
language
learning, learning
beyond the
classroom

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es el de abordar algunas consideraciones para la formulación de estrategias pedagógicas que puedan llevar el aprendizaje del inglés fuera de las aulas a través de una perspectiva basada en los principios de la biopedagogía y del profesor mediador que se centran en el desarrollo del ser humano desde la cultura del amor, el respeto, la cooperación, la coinspiración, y el cuidado por el otro; y que enfatizan la importancia de la creatividad, las emociones y sobre todo al individuo como actor fundamental del proceso. De igual manera, este artículo expone el importante papel de la tecnología online al proponer algunas mediaciones pedagógicas para la enseñanza del inglés fuera del aula.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

biopedagogía,
mediación,
tecnología,
aprendizaje
de idiomas,
aprendizaje fuera
del aula.

INTRODUCTION

If authentic English use available on online multimedia sources (informal setting) and the one available in formal instruction (formal setting) are compared, it could be argued that the one provided inside the classrooms offers more possibilities for learning since it is carefully designed and selected for this purpose. However, learners' exposure to authentic interactions out of the classrooms has proven to be of great importance in language learning since this seems to account for the success of many English learners out there (Nunan, 2014; Richards, 2015). Kuure (2011) exemplifies this by making an interesting observation about the role of English in Finland and argues that Finnish young people voluntarily expose themselves to the English language outside the classroom to accomplish personal goals like unlocking a game level through "walkthroughs", understanding a movie or song, or even to read manuals or instructions. Consequently, Finnish young people seem to be more fluent in English compared to learners from south Europe (Richards, 2015).

Although this is true in many European countries due to the advent of the internet, the so-called pop culture, and the different multimedia platforms in English (as cited in Richards, 2015), this is arguably the case for most English learners in Latin American countries like Colombia. In these countries, the primary language input still comes from the classrooms where opportunities for authentic interaction are often scarce. This may be due to two phenomena. First, multimedia sources, digital platforms, and recreational online activities are either originally in Spanish or dubbed into Spanish which limits opportunities for comprehensible input outside the classroom (Richards, 2015); and second, most learners and teachers still seem to think of English learning as a very technical activity making formal classroom ins-

truction to remain as the primary source of language learning.

However, the "art of teaching a language" is constantly evolving resulting in the shift of fundamental assumptions and principles regarding the way how a language is learned, the role of grammar, and the role of the students and the teachers. We have moved from grammar-focused and teacher-centered classrooms to more communicative learning environments where the learner is at the very center of *everything*. English language teaching can no longer focus only on teaching linguistic elements, let alone mere grammar, but on creating meaningful learning experiences based on real-life scenarios or situations that are relevant to learners, and in which they can develop metacognitive, social, and human skills.

Accordingly, this paper attempts to provide important considerations and context for teachers who are willing to explore meaningful learning strategies that use authentic English input available outside the classroom not only to support formal instruction but also to create pedagogical mediations that can help turn the idea of English teaching from a technical activity, into a mission to mediate English learning experiences beyond the classroom toward human development. These considerations are based on current language teaching principles and bio-pedagogical characteristics that promote the development of individuals in terms of their creativity, emotions, feelings, caring for others, identity, and compassion (Devia, 2018).

A BIO-PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE TEACHING

Maturana (2015) argues that people are biological-cultural beings, or "molecular autopoietic beings" that live as languaging individuals who usually care for what happens around them because of their effect on other people, other living beings, and on the bios-

phere. The concept of “Autopoiesis” was coined by this author to describe the system in which the dynamic of molecular-production processes occurs to constitute a self-producing entity. In other words, this term explains how living beings are discreet units, and gives an idea of the fundamental conditions for life. Another way in which this term can be understood is that of autopoietic systems which are the producer and the product at the same time. However, this term is also extremely connected with the external factors that allow an organism’s autopoietic system to continue its realization.

From this biological perspective, the concept of autopoiesis in language learning can refer to two major aspects. 1) the system in which the dynamic language learning processes occur in a learner as a unity (a whole system), and not just in one area of the individual. 2) autopoiesis is a dynamic system that allows learners to construct, destruct, modify and reconstruct their knowledge through their “ecological niche”. An ecological niche is the medium or environment that enables an organism’s autopoietic system to occur, or in other words, the organism’s very existence (Maturana, 2015). Storch (2008) defines ecological niches as the relational positions of organisms in their environments or biomes. Consequently, and from the ecological perspective of language learning, an ecological niche refers to the learners’ environment. Learners coexist with other learners, individuals, situations, infrastructures, and all kinds of elements and circumstances. Hence, learners constantly acquire knowledge through their interactions with their niches, and when the right conditions are met.

Maturana (2015) also introduced the term “dynamic architecture” which refers to the ability of organisms’ molecular architecture to participate in its own transformation of the entity itself along with its sensory-operational relational dynamic. Individuals’ structures are

in constant change, and therefore their relation to their ecological niche is dynamic too. This is an interesting concept if seen from the English learning perspective since learning a language is not a static process. On the contrary, learning a language is an active and dynamic process. “What I know today is not the same as what I will know tomorrow”. People are always learning and the way how people learn also changes in response to the learning niche and the learner’s “architecture”.

Maturana (2016) and Tebar (2011) provide an important theoretical background for effective pedagogical mediation. Maturana, from his bio-cultural perspective of systematic consequences of our evolutionary natural drift and molecular autopoietic systems; and Tebar, from his call for pedagogical mediation through the cognitive map of 6 parameters (content, modality of language, mental operations, cognitive functions in the phases of mental act, complexity level, and abstraction level). These two perspectives provide strong theoretical and epistemic insight on the individuality of learners, as well as guidelines for effective mediated intervention.

As observed above, bio-pedagogy centers the educational practice on the students as the most important actors in the process, each one carrying a particular context and experiences. Therefore, education must respond to the necessities of the learners, but it cannot only concentrate on learning but on the students as individuals using a holistic perspective focused on love, caring, and communication “the new talk” where students can learn how to live (Devia, 2018). Hence, bio-pedagogical practices do not focus on making the student a better learner, but rather a better human due to their holistic approaches based on love, feelings, awareness, and the care for others, which undoubtedly should eventually lead to the modification of the learner’s metacognition, critical thinking, and learning processes.

Mediated language learning strategies beyond the classroom that take on a bio-pedagogical approach must be orientated towards the sensibilization, commitment, and relational attitudes that highlight and promote participation, cooperation, and co-inspiration from kindness, corporality, and the ethics of care (Castillo & Castillo, 2013). This perspective requires to emphasize the fundamental characteristics that make learners social humans as well as the very essence of pedagogy as a formative science in function of life itself.

CONSIDERATION AND CHALLENGES FOR MEDIATING ENGLISH LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

The idea that learning English is an obligation in a program's curricula, or that it is something impossible to do is a recurrent thought that most students seem to have. Unfortunately, this perception appears to be deeply rooted in the students' minds. The mediation of learning strategies that take English learning outside the classrooms do not have to overturn this belief at once, nor should this be their objective. However, the overall results of these strategies may have a positive impact on the participants' perception that could be the starting point for a complete change in their mindsets regarding English learning.

These cognitive modifications in the students regarding their English learning perception can lead to the development of autonomy, and self-regulated strategies through direct exposure to the language in a meaningful way. Tebar (2011) states that a mediator seeks to make cognitive modification through his or her mediation in the learners' disposition for learning while creating direct exposure to external stimuli. It is important that teaches

do not only focus on the content they will teach to their students, but also on cognitive modification-driven strategies that teach their students how to be autonomous when learning English because a learner's success mostly depends on what he or she does to learn the language outside the classroom.

To design and mediate excellent English language strategies beyond the classrooms, teachers need to reflect on their abilities to implement bio-pedagogical characteristics, and to keep up to date regarding the new trends in language teaching and mediations. A self-reflective English teacher opens the door to constant training and development which allows him or her to create their own approach to teaching – one that responds not only to the curriculum and educational policies but also to societal and students' needs. Therefore, deeply understanding the processes that are involved in second and foreign language learning, and how to teach a language from a culture of love, respect, and care for others are additional important challenges that teachers must face when designing and mediating excellent English pedagogical strategies outside the classroom.

Nevertheless, despite the widely accepted approaches to language teaching like CLT, the notion of a post-methods era, and the advantages of bio-pedagogy, most teachers struggle to incorporate exploratory and reflective approaches to teaching, and still view the classroom as the only environment where learning can occur. Consequently, most teachers limit their practice to transmitting the course content through grammar-based instructions without considering appropriate mediations. Providing students with the most appropriate learning environment should be the main goal of every language teacher.

ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND STRATEGIES MEDIATED OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Different technological and multimedia resources in English are wildly accessible nowadays in Colombia that could provide students with authentic English. Internet television through video streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and YouTube is a very common and valuable source of real, everyday English input that most students have access to, but very few use it in the target language. Mediating strategies and activities that promote this out-of-class resource to increase the intensity of exposure, authentic spoken English input, and overall intake as support for classroom instruction is a pedagogical opportunity that is worth experimenting with.

When mediating new activities or learning strategies beyond the classroom, it is important to make sure that they complement the existing content and learning processes, and that they contribute to progress assessment. An excellent way to do this is by creating meaningful learning experiences full of intentionality, and that are enticing for the students. They must carry new and affective meaning; they must be based on bio-pedagogical principles, and they must have a sense of transcendence for the learners since their purpose should be to make meaningful and life-lasting cognitive modifications. These activities or tasks can help personalize learning as they integrate skills, guide collaboration, and develop strategies to facilitate understanding. Here is a list of ideas for mediating pleasant English learning experiences outside the classroom.

Field trips/immersion trips. A good English language teacher/mediator must be able to think out of the box. This can have a literal meaning if, by box, we mean the classroom. English teachers can build strong profes-

sional networks throughout the years, and they can use this as the basis for powerful mediating language strategies outside the classroom. Teachers from two different educational institutions could work together to create a field or immersion trip for their students. Depending on how well these trips are structured, this could create opportunities for students to interact in the target language with other students from different backgrounds, and in an authentic setting.

Pen friendship: Technology brings people closer and shortens distances. In the past, having a penfriend was not uncommon for educational practices, but waiting for a letter to arrive was not practical for a language class. Today, a good idea to mediate language learning outside the classroom is to have students from two institutions exchange experiences through social media or instant messaging apps. This could be monitored by the teacher and clear objectives and purposes could be established. Other interacting tools are websites like www.speaking24.com where learners can get in contact with English learners around the globe through skype. Students could be asked to make an interactive presentation about the different cultures they encounter on this site.

Multimedia and technology tools. In general, multimedia and technology are two important resources that offer authentic language and opportunities for real interaction. Different platforms and tools can be found on the web, and they are not always accessible from the classroom, for example, Storycorps. Storycorps is an online platform that aims to preserve and share humanity's stories to build connections between people. This platform offers language learners opportunities to learn about different cultures and backgrounds as well as authentic English in the form of short videos and their scripts. Students can also interact with other people through comments and more.

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Richards (2002) presents an interesting reflection on the shift that second and foreign language teaching has undergone over the past 30 years, expounding the notion that it is an ever-changing and dynamic field. What were considered cutting-edge ideas and practices a couple of decades ago are now considered outdated and have fallen out of favor among teachers and academics. Consequently, pedagogical mediation in English is also destined to evolve in the future, probably taking a step towards language learning outside the classroom through online multimedia technologies.

Therefore, the use of online multimedia and communication technologies as a resource for autonomous language learning outside the classrooms is likely to become a pressing issue in the language teaching field. Thus, Colombian schools and universities need to examine how their students learn

through these technologies in out-of-class environments to design new approaches to language learning based on contemporary perspectives of learning such as the bio-pedagogical principles. This, to ensure that the aim of these new approaches is not only the development of communicative skills, but also the development of human beings while providing spaces for accepting, and legitimizing the student through the biology of love, caring, and respect. Learning cannot take place in an environment that promotes fear, sadness, or frustration, but in one that promotes life, wellbeing, emotions, feelings, and meaningful interactions.

Finally, teachers must be open-minded and move towards more creative practices. Being a mediator is about being creative, thoughtful, and organized when planning meaningful learning activities not only to promote learning but also to promote cognitive modification in the students and their perceptions about what is being learned and how is being learned.



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