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# THE ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING IN MORE CONVENTIONAL SETTINGS: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

The ecological perspective is promising and opportunistic in that it views language learning from a rather different perspective compared to more conventional streams of thought. Nevertheless, each and every learning and teaching environment is a unique ecosystem with various influences and codes of behaviour which constrain the application of certain methods/approaches and hinder some streams of thought. The present study was conducted to investigate some of the problems that may arise as a result of applying the ideas of ecology to more conventional language learning settings. The authors argue for and against the ecological perspective using a qualitative design which draws on data obtained from interviews with Iranian school and university level teachers and students. They also draw on class recordings, class notes, quotes from family members, colleagues, classmates, and personal experience where necessary. The findings suggest that ecology will remain and set of ideas unless language teachers, students, stakeholders, and everyone involved in the educational structure truly understand it.

**Key words:** Ecology, Qualitative design, Iranian teachers, Iranian students, Interview

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Goethe once said that everything has been thought of before, but that the difficulty is to think of it again" (Van Lier, 2004, p. vii). The same certainly is true of the ecological perspective. Anyone familiar with the socio-cultural theory, mediated learning, scaffolding and similar concepts would confess that the ecological theory of language learning has not only not come out of the blue but is perhaps as old as Vygotsky himself. Of course, this does not imply that the ecological approach and the socio-cultural theory are the same thing, rather it indicates that the underlying assumptions of the ecological perspective have been in place for a long time and have only recently been broadened and reformulated to fit the current context and give a theoretical strength and pedagogical focus to SCT that is otherwise not always evident. Put otherwise, the "ecological approach promises to give coherence to a collection of ideas and practices that have been increasing in prominence and attraction for some time. Many of these ideas and practices come from different theoretical orientations, or just from good and well-informed practice, and it is assumed that an ecological approach can lend consistency and methodological rigor to them. In other words, an ecological approach can act as a galvanizing force for many different – though sympathetic – initiatives" (Van Lier, 2004, p. vii).

Despite being insightful, promising, opportunistic, flexible and an escape from more conventional streams of thought such as that of Chomsky or Krashen, the socio-cultural theory, let alone, the ecological approach have not been fully understood and lend to numerous interpretations and activities. The problem though not specific to conventional educational contexts in third world or developing countries is more evident in these settings. Students, teachers, stakeholders, parents, and anyone involved in the educational structure have either not fully understood the ecological approach or are not even aware of its existence. Under such conditions, the question that remains to be answered is whether the ecological perspective is capable of fulfilling its promises and providing opportunities for better learning in more conventional educational contexts? The present study is an attempt to show that applying ecology theory and ecological thinking to language learning is not as easy as it sounds. Assuming that a lot of

teachers are extremely attached to their beliefs and devoted to their past practices and teaching experiences, teacher educational programs may have a very hard time of shedding some light on the value(s) of the ecological perspective. The same is equally true about language learners and their parents. It takes a long time to convince them that the ecological theory is there to assist them to reach and perform at their full optimal potential. It is also very demanding and at times problematic to persuade the stakeholders that ecology is another way of thinking which may at times be a superior perspective of approaching language learning and language teaching. What complicates matters more is the undeniable fact that language teaching and language learning is deeply tied to economic factors. Institutions, universities, and schools many not have access to the necessary resources or be resistant to change because of the benefits associated with practicing conventional language teaching methods.

In what follows we present a short summary of the ecological approach and its main characteristics, then we argue for and against the ecological theory in light of the Iranian students and teachers viewpoints. However, we must not forget that "nothing has ever been finished before, the difficulty is to avoid thinking we can finish it now" (Van Lier, 2004, p. viii). We hope the reader may find some stimulation of thought and practice in these pages, whether this stems from agreement or from disagreement with what is actually said.

## 2. ECOLOGY

Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel invented the term ecology and since then it has been established as a scientific discipline (Arndt & Janney, 1983) to refer to the totality of relationships of an organism with all other organisms with which it comes into contact. Originally, ecology was the study and management of the environment or specific ecosystems. Nevertheless, it is currently also used to represent a world view that is totally different from the scientific or rational one inherited from Descartes and some of his contemporaries which take an anthropocentric world view (Van Lier, 2004). The ecological worldview assumes that humans are part of a greater natural order, or even a great living system. Put otherwise, the ecological worldview is ecocentric or geocentric and contrasted with the world view which assumes that it is the right and destiny of the human race to control and exploit the earth and all its inanimate and animate resources (Van Lier, 2004). Arne Naess referred to this view of ecology as the deep ecology which is compared with shallow ecology, which is concerned with ways of controlling ecosystems and managing them (Allen & Hoekstra, 1992). While shallow ecology uses the methods of traditional science to prevent, solve or minimize the environmental impact of human activity and natural disasters, deep ecology seeks new methods of research that take account of the full complexity and interrelatedness of processes that combine to produce an environment (Van Lier, 2004). In this way deep ecology links up with systems theory, cybernetics, and chaos and complexity theory. However, this does not necessarily imply that the two perspectives to ecology are mutually exclusive or that one is incapable of informing educational research and practice. As Van Lier (2004) puts it:

Ecological engineering, management and repair are necessary in a world in which the environment is clearly under extreme stress. It is not too farfetched to say that the same is true of educational, social and economic systems. Ecological studies can help provide understanding and suggest treatment. However, the dominant dynamic can very easily be one of crisis management, a constant fixing of things gone awry. In addition, it can create the (probably false) impression that everything can be 'fixed,' and the status quo in terms of exploitation and contamination can be maintained. The second approach (deep ecology) proposes that 'fixing' is not enough, adds a sense of vision, purpose, and an overt ideology of transformation (a critical perspective). (p. 4).

The ecological perspective has some features which are not specific to the ecological theory in each and every case, but in their totality they amount to a new way of exploring language learning. In the following paragraphs the main characteristics of the approach are addressed and briefly discussed. The authors directly quote Van Lier (2004, pp.5-8) to facilitate comprehension and avoid ambiguity.

### Relations

“According to educational Ecological linguistics, language is seen as a set of relations between people and the world, and language learning is ways of relating more effectively to people and the world (Van Lier, 2004). Affordance is a key concept here and is defined as a relationship between an organism (the learner) and the environment, that signals an opportunity for or inhibition of action (Van Lier, 2004). “The environment includes all physical, social and symbolic affordances that provide grounds for activity” (Van Lier, 2004, p.5). Viewing language as a system of relations, instead of a collection of objects, requires changes in terms of how linguistics is defined, and how learning is conceptualized”.

### Context

“EL regards context as not just something that surrounds language, but that in fact defines language, while at the same time being defined by it. A common piece of advice in research is “to take the context into account.” Such advice raises questions like how, how much, what aspects of the context, and so on. It also suggests that contextual information is added on to whatever is investigated, in a supplementary sort of way. But in ecology, context is the heart of the matter”.

### Patterns, systems

“EL sees language as patterns of patterns, and systems of systems. “Patterns that connect,” as Bateson used to say. Words like pattern and system sidestep the notion of rules and structures. The latter terms are associated with predetermined and predictable states of affairs, situations that are more or less fixed and that remain the same over time and space”.

### Emergence

“EL regards language learning not as gradual, linear acquisition, but as emergence. Emergence happens when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher-order system. The whole is not only more than the sum of its parts, it is of a different nature than the parts. The new system is on a different scale, and has different meanings and patterns of functioning than the simpler ingredients had from which it emerged. In language, grammar emerges from lexis (Bates & Goodman, 1999) , symbols emerge from tools (Vygotsky, 1978), learning emerges from participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Language proficiency emerges from all these transformations”.

### Quality

“EL makes the notion of quality a central construct to be investigated. The quality of educational experience is seen to be crucially different from educational standards, though a valid ecological aim of education is to harmonize quality and standards, by investigating both how they are different and how they are related. Arne Naess pointed out long ago that quality of life is not the same as standard of living. Our standard of living may be so high that we have three shiny cars parked in front of the house. If everybody's standard of living is this high, our quality of life may be reduced because the air is polluted, the noise level increases, and we can't walk around the neighbourhood any more. The same may be true (in different ways, of course) in education: there may be so much focus on higher standards that there are tougher and tougher tests all the time, and there is no more time for music, field trips, art, and just exploring knowledge and broadening one's mind”.

### Value

“EL proclaims that all action, all research, all practice, is value-laden, value-driven, and value producing. It says that language education is, in addition to whatever else it is, always also a science of values (Reed, 1996). This goes against the traditional Cartesian ideal of science, which separated the *res cogitans* (the domain of theology) from the *res extensa* (the domain of science). The object of this enterprise was “to carve out a sphere of influence for science

so that it would be freed from the shackles of theological control, and at the same time, to reassure the Church that science was not threatening to take over its territory" (Goldsmith 1998, p. 6). The resulting view of science is one that sets aside issues of morality and social concerns, and it is dominant to this day, with all the pernicious consequences that have followed therefrom. This explains why Chomsky separates his scientific work (generative linguistics) from his political activism, and cannot conceive that one might be relevant to the other. Instead, EL asserts that we can – and should – define science (and its processes of production and consumption) in a different way, as a critical and moral enterprise".

#### Critical

"If we look at language learning from a contextual perspective, if we put quality before quantity, and if we focus on value and values rather than on so-called objective facts or the status quo, then it is inevitable that our approach will be a critical one. In other words, we will examine to what extent educational practices further the specific goals and ideals that we have articulated. If they do not, then we will elaborate practices that do further those goals and ideals. The critical perspective requires a constant evaluation of what is actually happening with what we think should be happening. It is not an indoctrination into any particular way of thinking, but rather a call to critical thinking and critical acting, based on well-articulated principles and personal convictions. Notions of power and constraints on principled action will undoubtedly come to the fore in any critical approach to thought and action, and when that happens, critical ecology implies an activist stance".

#### Variability

"A teacher might proudly announce: "I treat them all the same." But children – learners of all ages for that matter – are all different, so that equal treatment is surely a doubtful pedagogical practice. There are many differences among learners that are relevant to their educational opportunities in general, and their classroom learning opportunities in particular. A good teacher understands the learners, and this means taking the differences into account. However, there is also variability at a much more macro level: educational systems, far from being the equalizers that policy makers suggest they are, actually manufacture inequalities across regional and socio-economic fault lines. Not all schools are created equal in any country, so that school systems both homogenize and select at the same time, however paradoxical this may seem".

#### Diversity

"Diversity relates to variability, but it is not the same. Whereas variability relates to the ways different learners learn, and what that means for the teacher, diversity addresses the value of having different learners and teachers in a class (or school) , and in more general terms, different kinds of people in a society, rather than a homogeneous population, however defined. In biology, diversity is essential in an ecosystem, and in the same way, a diverse society (in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, interests, etc.) may be healthier in the long run than a homogeneous one. In addition, the language to be learned (whether L1 or L2) is presented as one that is not one monolithic standardized code, but a collection of dialects, genres and registers. It is often tacitly assumed that learners would be confused by being presented with a diversity of dialects, cultures, social customs, but it can be argued that more confusion ultimately results from the presentation of a homogeneous language and a single speech community, generalizations that in fact do not exist. With appropriate language and learning awareness activities, learners should be perfectly capable of understanding diversity, since it will be easy to establish that it exists in the language all around them, at home, in the community, in school, and around the world. The reader be warned: this is a very tricky and loaded subject, one that raises passions rather than rational argument".

#### Activity

"Ecological linguistics studies language and language learning as areas of activity. Gone is the picture of a classroom with rows of empty heads passively soaking up knowledge issuing forth (in the form of pedagogical discourse) from the talking head at the front of the room; Instead, we visualize a community of practice in which learners go about the business of learning by carrying out activities of various kinds, working together, side by side, or



on their own. In this ecosystem, learners are autonomous, i.e., they are allowed to define the meaning of their own acts within their social context (Shotter 1984, p. 147, cited in Oyama, 2000, p. 189). Autonomy in an ecological approach does not mean independence or individualism, however. It words, and being emotionally connected to one's actions and speech (Damasio, 2003), within one's community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This type of autonomy is dialogical in Bakhtin's sense (1981): socially produced, but appropriated and made one's own".

## 2.1 ECOLOGY AND COMPLEXITY THEORY

"In contrast to the assumptions of scientific research in which every input has an output, and every effect has an identifiable cause preceding it, applying the notions of chaos and complexity to language learning necessitates a change in the way we look at or perceive learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2002). In keeping with the assumptions of chaos or complexity theory, every ecosystem, including any social ecosystem contains a large number of influences in an unpredictable and uncontrolled way, and somehow among all the movement and interaction a complex order emerges (Van Lier, 2004). This dynamic order "provides affordances for active participants in the setting, and learning emerges as part of affordances being picked up and exploited for further action" (Van Lier, 2004, p.8).

This view of language learning and language teaching as opposed to more context reductionist, data reductionist, and complexity reductionist approaches has positive consequences since it helps teachers understand that the classroom is a complex system in which many agreeing and disagreeing influences operate. In light of such an understanding teachers, students, and all the people involved in the educational structure do not associate success or failure to a pre-specified, clear cut factor but rather perceive them as consequences of micro and macro influences in operation. Under such conditions, stakeholders can intervene at the precise moment and the most accurate manner which could be beneficial to learners, teachers, and overall educational system.

The above discussions, especially the discussion on the characteristics of the ecological approach, or the use of the word 'approach' its self may imply the false assumption that the ecological perspective is an innovative way or indeed for some a revolution that follows the methods era or is a better solution to the shortcomings of the socio-cultural theory. As repeatedly pointed out by scholars, ecology is neither an approach nor a method. It is another way of thinking which has consequences for language teaching and language learning (Van Lier, 2004). Thinking in the ecological perspective provides a window of opportunity for understanding that language teaching and language learning are value-laden, complex enterprises that are affected by micro and macro influences.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

In light of the previously stated assertions and with respect to the fact that ecology is a promising and opportunistic way of thinking and working which provides further chances for success, the question that needs addressing is:

1. What are the problems of applying the ideas of the ecological perspective to more conventional language learning contexts?
2. Does the magnitude of the challenges facing the ecological perspective of language learning imply totally abandoning it?

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. PARTICIPANTS

With respect to the prominence attached to language learning/language teaching at the school and university level and the fact that the majority of Iranian schools and universities employ the conventional methods of teaching, the researchers decided to look at the ecological perspective from the view point of Iranian high school and university teachers and students. To the end, 10 male and female English language teachers were selected from five different high schools and asked to talk the ecological perspective and what they thought about it. Caution was exercised to select experienced as well as inexperienced teachers. The purpose behind which was to see whether the more

experienced teachers were aware of the existence of the ecological perspective or not. To avoid negative consequences, the name of the city and schools and universities will be kept confidential. In addition to the first group of participants, the study favoured from four interviews who were responsible for conducting the interview and collecting the data. A third group of individuals also participated in the study. They were MA students who were supposed to transcribe and type (in to the computer) the recordings from the interviews. The researchers also interviewed 5 PHD students and borrowed quotations from friends, classmates, and even family members. Reference is also made to personal experience were necessary.

#### **4.2. INSTRUMENT**

The researchers conducted fifteen, fifteen minute interviews. The interviews were held in Persian to avoid ambiguity and communication failure due to the low language level of some of the teachers and students. The teachers' responses were recorded on a voice recorder and later transcribed. The general structure of the interview was based on Lynch's (1996) interview guide. In order to check the credibility of the obtained data, member-checking and peer-debriefing were employed. In addition, the study also favoured from class recordings, notes and summaries from the classes that one of the authors of the present study attended as a PHD student.

#### **4.3. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

Since qualitative methods provide a much more in depth and comprehensive picture of the subject under study, the researchers decided to use them in the present study. In this regard, the researchers attended different schools and told the teachers that they had the opportunity to participate in a study which had never or rarely been done in Iran. Later, the teachers were invited to come in for an informal discussion with the researchers which was aimed at selecting more informed teachers and excluding others. In the final phase of the study, the teachers were interviewed and their responses were recorded. The above stages were repeated for the students at the university.

#### **4.4. DATA ANALYSIS**

In the first step, the researchers worked with the data, organizing and getting familiar with them. Later, the raw data was codified through a process which is known as open or preliminary coding. At this point, the researcher identified a wide range of concepts and categories about the ecological perspective which were later reduced. In the next step, called axial coding; the researcher attempted to develop the basic categories. Finally, using selective coding, some categories were integrated to create a model for the ecological factors.

#### **5. DISCUSSION**

The major criticism pointed against the ecological perspective may be that it is hard to grasp and understand, especially in more conventional language teaching and language learning contexts. Drawing on the fact that the ecological perspective draws on different theories and borrows from a plethora of theoretical, anthropological, philosophical, and biological assumptions, it is at times very difficult though not impossible to fully understand it, let alone apply it. As mentioned before, an often held misconception is that the ecological theory is a method or approach which can be applied to the classroom like any other method or approach. Yet, ecology is another way of thinking, not a clear cut, readily made method or approach which can be taken in to the classroom by the teacher. Assuming that thinking and perceiving are deeply rooted in customs, traditions, culture, language, values and etc.; it takes a long time and requires various resources to change the way one thinks and behaves. Under such conditions and with respect to the fact that most Iranian English teachers, both those who belong to the old school and those who have recently graduated from universities are unfamiliar with thinking in the socio-cultural theory and are accustomed to and have been educated in the conventional methods of language teaching and language learning, we cannot expect them to think in the socio-cultural theory and the ecological perspective. The very fact which was reflected in the teachers responses on the interview. When asked about whether she was ready to shift from the audio-lingual method to a socio-cultural or ecological perspective, Minoo said:



...what...ahh...say it again please...the ecological perspective...let me see...I am sure I've heard about it before. Is it a method of teaching...maybe an approach? I graduated from the right university but our professor never talked about it...Has it come in to fashion recently? Yes...I'll start using it right away.

A close inspection of Minoo's response to the question shows that she has either never heard of the ecological perspective and is only pretending that she has, or she has been told something about it but failed to understand. Regardless of the reason, Minoo's response is an indicator of the prevailing condition in Iranian high schools and among Iranian high school teachers; where the teachers are under such work load that they hardly if ever have time to study about the recent developments made in the realm of language teaching and learning. Another problem lies with the Iranian ministry of education which does not oblige teachers to participate in teacher educational programs or in service workshops and favours the conventional methods of thinking over the socio-cultural theory or its offspring-the ecological perspective. However, the problem does not merely lie with the lack of time or the Iranian ministry of education. Even if we assume that teachers are freed from their work load and the ministry of education advocates a socio-cultural perspective or an ecological one, it takes quite a long time for the ecological perspective to establish itself as a dominant way of thinking.

The ecological perspective asserts that individuals (in our case language learners) are different and treating them in the same manner is a pedagogical mistake. This very simple sentence is a place for controversy in any attempt to apply the ecological perspective to more conventional language teaching and language learning contexts where students are treated the same despite their age, gender, and etc. In such settings, learners are either regarded as good or bad. Teachers do the teaching and expect learning to occur. In such situations lack of success or failure is often associated with laziness, lack of effort, and unwillingness to study. Contrary to this, the ecological perspective realizes individual differences and believes that teaching should account for them.

The situation is more or less the same in Iranian schools. There is a rock solid conviction that teachers are to treat all the individuals the same. Failure to do so is a sign of educational inequality and the teacher is held responsible for and accused of disregarding ethnics in education. The belief is so hard established that the teacher would face severe consequences if he/she treats the students according to their differences. Akbar's reaction to a question about how he treated his students and if he was willing substitute his approach with an ecological one would help clarify the situation:

...I've tried to do justice in my classes. All through the thirty years I have had a 'halal' income, how come you're asking me to become a follower of satan? Your young [unexperienced] and don't understand how mighty our lord is...ask for forgiveness and don't verbalize these thoughts ever again...there is no difference between the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the smart and the dumb...You have got a long way to go. You'll understand when you're my age.

Akbar is one of the hundred teachers who believe that justice in education is equal to treating all the students the same. However, Akbar is not only mistaken about treating the students all the same but has also misunderstood the ecological theory. It was once thought that treating individuals based on their ethnicity, race, social status, and economic backgrounds is unacceptable and faulty pedagogical practice. However, according to the ecological perspective and more recent language learning theories, ethnicity, race, culture and etc. can be insightful and direct pedagogical practice. For instance, different cultures, races or ethnic groups may have different learning styles and strategies which requires different treatment on the part of the teacher. Therefore, realizing individual differences and responding to them is not only not doubtful pedagogical practice, but correlates well with the latest scientific advances in other fields.

The challenge facing the ecological theory, particularly in more conventional settings is how to convince teachers that justice is not necessarily equal to treating all the students the same. Understanding that Iranian teachers are deeply tied to their religious beliefs and social values, it is not clear whether the ecological theory is capable of convincing them that realizing individual differences is very important while avoiding facing stigma and being rejected.

Both the socio-cultural theory and the ecological theory are in stark contrast to more traditional methods and approaches in that they focus on language as a set of relations between people and the world, and language learning

as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world. Not long ago, learning a language meant mastering a set of discrete objects such as morphology, phonology, and syntax which were presented to the learners in the form of comprehensive input. With the emergence of the socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective, the view of language as a set of discrete items in the form of comprehensive input has given way to language as a set of relations in the form of affordances. The very nature of which is illusive and intangible for many consultants of the old school. In the present study, for example, none of the interviewed teachers were familiar with or could fully understand what the concept of affordance meant; even after having been discussed to them in great detail:

...are you sure? Never heard of it [before]. We have input, intake, and output; but not what you said [affordance]...perhaps it is not related to our field...?! You are really good at it [getting people trapped]...I get it now...you're doing this to see if I am familiar with the terminology in our field [knowledgeable] or not...haven't seen anyone as smart as me, have you?

As evident from this short extract, the teacher is doubtful about the existence of the concept of affordance and is so lost in misconception and dilemma that she thinks that the researcher is trying to get her caught. This is often the case with many of the Iranian teachers who are familiarized with such concepts such as input, intake, and output right from the beginning of their teaching careers. Most of the presented materials at the BA, MA, and PHD levels centre on the ideas of Chomsky, Krashen, Swain and/or information processing models. Concepts such as affordance and the assumptions of the socio-cultural theory are either rarely taught or not welcomed, even by PHD students, let alone teachers who hold a BA or MA degree. One of the authors of the present study recalls the moment when one of his classmates (Mojtaba) opposed to the course syllabus which centred on the socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective:

...I do not mean to be rude or arrogant...To me it would have been much better if we had also studied the ideas of Krashen and Chomsky in much more detail...it would have sufficed if we had studied a state of art paper about the socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective. This would have gave more room to other theories.

At first sight, Mojtaba's objection to the course content may be regarded as a call for knowledge. However, when we consider the fact that the ideas of Chomsky, Krashen and the like have been presented several times through the BA and MA courses, as well as the first semester of the PHD course; we come to the conclusion that what Mojtaba said is attributable to the dominant stream of thought which favours more conventional theories over the socio-cultural or ecological perspective. The battle has already begun, history will judge the real victors. For the time being however, it seems unlikely that the more conventional methods and approaches give way to the ecological theory. They will continue existing just like their ancestors the GTM and the ALM.

Another problem which is associated with every stream of thought is the gap that exists between thought and action. As language teachers and former students we have all confronted presenters at workshops, conferences, seminars and met colleagues or teachers who lack consistency in thought and action. Said otherwise, they merely pay lip service to the appealing tenants of the socio-cultural theory or the ecological perspective and at the same time think and act in an entirely different way. The PHD students interviewed in the present study clearly stated that this was defiantly evident in their teacher's behaviour. They told the interviewer that their question about why the teachers didn't practice socio-cultural theory had often been left unanswered:

...I have always wondered to myself about what keeps us from practicing the socio-cultural theory and putting aside the more conventional methods and approaches...I don't agree, at least we can start doing it at the this [PHD] level...Know what? I really once did that...I looked him in the eye and asked him why he didn't practice socio-cultural theory after many years of teaching it. He went in to a long silence and related it to the educational system...Its nonsense to me. He has the authority. The problem is that he lacks the capability of convincing himself...words, words, words; stop all the crap and just do it.

A very nice analogy can be drawn between the ecological perspective and the Quran, both are alluring, both are highly valued, and both are printed in the highest quality using the finest ink and paper. However, they will not have any effect what so ever, unless people simultaneously think and act according to their guidelines and procedures. The ecological perspective is the victim of the lack of consistency between thought and action. On the one hand there

are teachers who claim that they are thinking in the socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective and emphasis its value but continue practicing the conventional methods and approaches; on the other hand, there are others who explicitly state that they have no faith in the socio-cultural theory and the ecological perspective and do not practice it. One of the more important reasons for this might be the complexity inherent in the ecological perspective. As mentioned elsewhere, most teachers, including those teaching at the university levels have a very hard time trying to make sense of all interrelated and complicated concepts and assumptions that the ecological approach offers. The very fact that puts off many teachers and discourages them from putting it in to practice. Teachers accustomed to the conventional methods and approaches may feel that thinking in the ecological sense is too costly and better be left to others. In short, the ecological perspective needs to make its concepts and assumptions more tangible and further applicable to the language learning contexts if it is attempting to establish its self as a dominant way of thinking.

A familiar sentence often heard when involved in a discussion about language teaching and language learning with Iranian teachers is "if we did it, they can do it too". This terse one liner is used by Iranian teachers to defend themselves when accused of employing conventional methods and approaches in their classes. The sentence refers to those teachers who use the language accurately and fluently but have learned it through the GTM and ALM. As odd as it may sound, there are some Iranian teachers who have managed to do so. These teachers reject using more recent methods and approaches and claim that the conventional methods and approaches are as good as them. The authors recall Mojtaba (the same language teacher and PHD student mentioned above) who hotly defended this stance starting with his usual sentence "sorry doctor" (referring to the professor):

...sorry doctor...but at the time me and you started learning English, there were no such things like the socio-cultural theory [and ecological perspective], however we learned to speak English...how do you justify this?...

The conversation went on for a while without any precise conclusion. Mojtaba is typical of the many teachers who understand the value and innovation of the socio-cultural theory but are not totally convinced why we must shift to more recent methods and approaches. An explanation often provided is that the more conventional methods and approaches did not include the learner, culture, and many other aspects that are crucial in language learning. Moreover, it is said that they resulted a high work load on the part of the teachers and students. As a response to these criticisms, proponents of the more conventional methods and approaches claim that there is not much difference between the work load of the conventional methods and approaches and more recent ones. Conducting a class according to the Socio-cultural theory and ecological perspective requires preparation and expertise. As a justification to the second criticism, teachers adhered to more conventional methods assert that since we are teaching in an EFL context, with an emphasis on reading and writing, issues of culture, customs, tradition and the like are not that prominent. It would suffice as long as the learner is able to communicate efficiently and effectively.

The challenge therefore facing the ecological perspective is convincing teachers that it is not limited to appealing sentences and pleasant assumptions and concepts. It needs to delve deep in to the minds of the individuals so that they practically feel how dissimilar, promising and opportunistic it is compared to more conventional methods and approaches.

As well as a shift in the way we perceive teaching and learning, any attempt to move away from conventional methods towards the socio-cultural theory or ecological perspective also requires modifications in the way we think about testing or assessment. With the emergence of the socio-cultural theory notions such as teaching through testing replaced traditional testing methods and approaches. The underlying assumption of dynamic assessment is identifying what a learner can and cannot do with mediation. However, using dynamic assessment (Poehner, 2008) is challenging and at times problematic. With respect to the fact that traditional testing methods and approaches have been around for so long, teachers, students, stakeholders, and even parents expect to evaluate the learners through some sort of formal test and often report it in the form of a numerical value. The situation is more the less the same in Iran. Tests and assessment procedures are more than often in the form of multiple choice items or essay type and the scores are reported on a 0-20 scale. There is no room for creativity and the reported score is the single indicator of ability, knowledge, or proficiency. Students expect teachers to give them a test at the end of the course or semester and other types of evaluation are not taken seriously. Stakeholders, parents, and employers disvalue informal, non-numerical evaluations. One of the authors of the present paper who has lived a broad for quite a while

and has been schooled there, recalls how his father (who holds a PHD degree from the university of Aberdeen) reacted angrily to the Iranian assessment system having fail to explain to the school dean what an 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E' and 'F' meant:

...God damn it...what a fool...here we are, stuck in the middle of all the usual misunderstanding and misconception...he [the school dean] told me that an 'A' was good for nothing. We [the Iranian educational system] are concerned with '19s' and '20s' here...come back with a '15' and I will register your son...

In the absence of a positive attitude towards non-numerical, informal, subjective evaluations, it is very demanding though not impossible for dynamic assessment to establish its self as a testing method along the more formal forms of evaluation. In a context where individual performance is highly valued and group work has almost no place in its educational structure, it is not surprising that there is no room for dynamic assessment. A lot of things must change and modifications must be made before concepts such as mediated testing and dynamic assessment can be recognized as one of the means of testing and teaching.

It is taken for granted that the school building, the class structure (whether seats or benches are used, whether they are attached to the floor), and the number of students; changes from a teaching context to another. In more conventional learning settings, including Iran; there are a large number of students in each class who are seated on benches attached to the floor facing the blackboard. Realizing that the most natural curriculum from an ecological perspective is a project-based one; it look as if project-based work might appear difficult if not impossible to realize in these situations. For instance, flexible seating arrangements maybe be impossible in large classes where desks may be attached to the floor. Similar questions and constraints have been noted by many teachers, and they need serious consideration, or else the ecological perspective runs the risk of being restricted to elite second language and academic language contexts.

A final point which is worth mentioning is concerned with the costs and benefits associated with practicing one method/approach compared to other methods/approaches. One stream of thought might be favoured over another because it is beneficial to a particular social or political group in that it carries notions of power and dominance expressed through religious, social, and cultural values. Compared to more democratic, open societies which advocate collective work and the sharing of power; more closed societies emphasis individualism and the limitation of power. Under such conditions it seems that the socio-cultural theory and the ecological perspective which assign an agentive role to learners and support autonomy may face extra difficulties and challenges in such situations. On the one hand they must face the previously stated and unstated problems, on the other hand, they must fight their way through the obstacles created by more powerful others. A common true assumption held by the ruling classes in such settings is that the purpose of the socio-cultural theory and ecological theory is more that language learning and education. They believe that these streams of thought are there to develop the minds of the individuals; which they regard as a potential threat to their authority.

## 6. CONCLUSION

So far we have discussed some of the problems and challenges facing the ecological theory of language learning. Mention was also made of the very illusive nature of the ecological perspective and how teachers, students, test designers, stakeholders and even parents fail to understand the basic assumptions of the ecological perspective. Based on the previously stated assertions, we are in a position to argue that applying the ecological idea and thinking in it are not as easy as is said. Ecology is deeply rooted in and borrows from many interrelated and complicated theoretical, anthropological, philosophical, and biological assumptions which are even very difficult for some expert to understand, let alone language teachers who have been trained in the conventional methods and approaches and are accustomed to them. Lack of teachers who have truly understood the ideas of the ecological perspective is a further problem. Language teachers, especially those teaching in schools, rarely if ever have time to study about the recent developments in language learning and language teaching; as a result, most of them are either not aware of the existence of the ecological perspective or fail to understand it fully. Under such conditions, we cannot expect teachers to act and behave according to the ideas of ecology as some have said. The question often left unanswered is whether it is possible for language teachers in more traditional language teaching settings to adhere to the ideas of

the ecological perspective when they have not understood even its basic assumptions? The authors while realizing the value and utility of the ecological perspective believe that it will remain and set of ideas unless language teachers, students, stakeholders, and everyone involved in the educational structure truly begin understanding it.

. Despite the difficulties noted, however, some scholars insist that it should be possible to apply ecological ideas in any work context. They assert that since ecology is not some method or theory, but a world view and a particular way of working; the connections between perception, action and context can be realized in any context, and the prominence of engagement and attunement can similarly always be recognized (Van Lier, 2004). Thinking in this way, even overcrowded classes with large numbers of students can become environments for linguistic exploration through language play (Sullivan, 2000), similarly, even disconnected sentences constructed for grammar practice can become starting points for interesting exchanges that explore learner initiative (Butzkamm, 1980; van Lier, 1988; Holliday, 1994). "Without ignoring or wishing away the very real and often debilitating constraints that adhere in many institutional settings, a teacher who keeps a clear view of the basic ecological principles can ignite sparks of interest that in turn can set in motion perceptual, social and cognitive processes that instigate learning" (Van Lier, 2004, p.222).

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