

# The Ecology of Language Learning

Practice to Theory - Theory to Practice

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Leo van Lier  
Monterey Institute of International Studies  
[lvanlier@miis.edu](mailto:lvanlier@miis.edu)



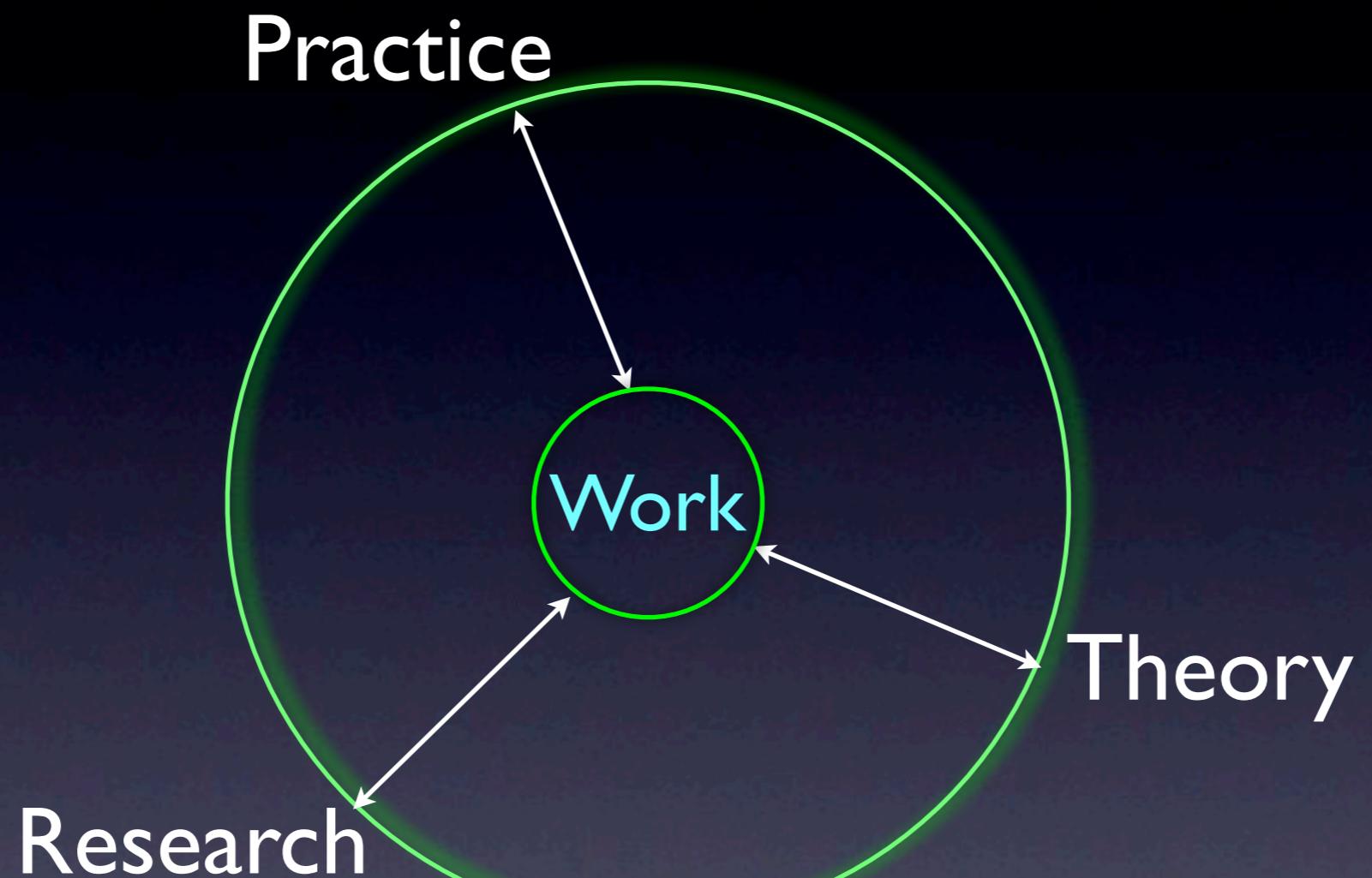
The ecology has spoken!

All theory, dear friend,  
is gray, but the golden  
tree of life springs ever  
green



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe





# Kurt Lewin



There is nothing as practical  
as a good theory.

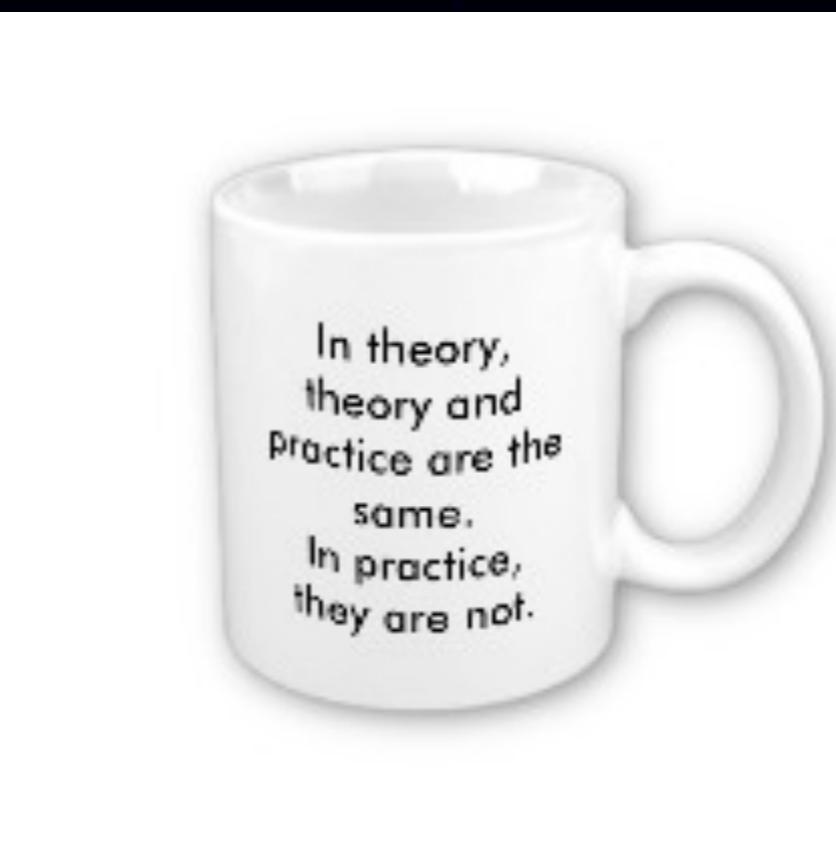




Figure 17. M. C. Escher,  
"Three Worlds,"  
lithograph 1955

"Layered Simultaneity" - Jan Blommaert

# In The Classroom



**FEST 21.com**

## The Class: Scene One:

L1: What's up with that Bill, Bill, Bill always? You always use weird names

L2: Why don't you use Aissata or Rachid or Ahmed or ...

...

L1: White, honky, Frenchie, frogs

T: You're not French?

L1: No, I'm not French?

T: Oh? I didn't know

L1: I am, but I'm not proud of it

T: fine. I'm not either

## The Class: Scene Two

(T asks students to write about their personal experiences and feelings)

L1: We just come to school, go home, eat and sleep

...

T: ... but what you feel is interesting

L: Because you're a teacher

L: It's your job

L: You're only saying that to get us to talk and stuff ... but it's not true.

# Ecological Concepts

- Relationships
  - Mutuality, Engagement, Collaboration
- Context
- Emergent Patterns, Systems
- Quality
- Value
- Critical perspective
- Variability and Diversity
- Agency
  - Action, Perception, Interpretation
  - Identity, Motivation

# Classroom Extracts (1-7)

1. What characterizes the context?
2. Comment on the relationships between interlocutors.
3. Locate instances of agency.
4. What can you say about learners' motivation?
5. How do learners express their identity?
6. Can you make judgments about high/low Quality?

(I) (Forman, 2005)

An EFL class in Thailand:

T:Would you be afraid of moving to a foreign country?

(pause)

T:Yes or no?

(pause)

T: Uh?

S:Yes.

T:Yes. Why?

(pause)

T:Why?

(pause)

T:Why?

(pause)

T:Mm?

(pause)

T:Why?

(pause)

T:Who would like to answer the question?

(pause)

T: Now, if you cannot answer the question and if you don't want to answer the question,

Okay, move further.

(2) (van Lier, 2003):

*In a project-based ESL class in the US, the teacher is going round the class assisting the learners who are working on constructing simple websites:*

T: warmer .. warmer .. it is warmer- that means more warm ... so maybe what you need to dooooo let's see is- it's double u a, double u a .. r m.... .... there you go and then you say replace..... .... done ...

(3) (van Lier, 2006):

*A CLIL class (geography) in a secondary school in the Netherlands:*

T: Is there anyone who knows subduction?

S: If one plate moves under another.

T: Yes.

(5) van Lier, 2003):

Two learners working together in the same project-based ESL class as extract (2), later on in the semester:

# L2 (XXX) link?

# LI. You want?

L2 Yes

L | Oh so you just link ... so now I teach you how to link

## L2 Link ..

Li Ya link ... link list is an address in you::r ... in your disk

# L2 uhuh

**L1 So. First we mark.....**

L2 yah.

L1 uhuh ... and click ... ahh... right .. yah

L2      uhuh

LI (XXX) right and copy ... ... copy? and then ... ... we go to ... you:r web ...

## file ... graphic

L2 hmm

uhuh

LI and then ... we link .. ya link

L2 link

L click right ... and [pest ... pest (=paste)] ... and okay ... okay

## L2. okay

# Li you got it!

# L2 Thank you



(6) (QTEL, WestEd, 2005)

*L is reading from a poster tacked on the blackboard containing the first part of a letter about language she is in the process of writing:*

L: I fou-uhhh... I found from my research that animal communication is not a language. Animal communication is different from the human communication because in case of dolphins they communicate through ultrasonic pulses that cannot be heard by the human ear. I don't think that there are languages better than other. This is about it, because I do not have enough time. But I appreciate that you teach me these things and I consider you the best teacher that I ever had in my life.

T: Amen, very nice job

(All): (Clap, laugh)

J (to L): Animal communication is not a language ... it IS a language, that's what I think. Because they are communicating with each other.

L: But they do not speak

(Lots of talking)

J: (You can have) everything in a language; you can have words, sounds and everything ...

L: But they don't have words. They don't say "Mama."

J: it is a characteristic, and in animal language some of the characteristics that YOU [pointing to T] said ... it IS a language.

(All): (Lots of talking! Discussing)

T: do we need sound? Do we need sound...?

Girl: I heard people say that animals they understanding everything ... but they don't speak themselves...

Boy: If you wanna say "excuse me" ... "ahun-uhn" [clearing throat demonstratively]

L: They don't say "excuse me"

Boy: Same thing

A: But I think we don't need a sound because people who can't talk they use signs ...

T: All right, all right. Now hold on, hold on. Angela has a comment.

A: (xxx) cause they don't talk, but they they - they communicate by doing signs [gesturing the making of a sign] so they don't need to speak to communicate to others. So I think ...

J: It IS a language [Emphatically pointing a finger at L]

T: A lot is going to depend on how you define language. O.K.?

You can define it in such a way as to exclude what animals do; you can define it in a very broad way, as a system of communication that includes everything.

(7) Content-based lesson by Stacy Crescenzi on  
“The Brain” (QTEL, WestEd):

*Students are working in groups to produce summaries of a text on brain damage. The teacher wants students to spell words for each other, rather than just copying them.*

S2: Why can't I just copy it?

T: It doesn't help you practice the language.

Doesn't help HIM practice the language. I want you to be able to use these academic terms.

S2: But I know English.

T: Yes, but psychoLOgical English.

# Great or Small Expectations?

1. How do we document learning?
2. What - or rather: When - are Learning Opportunities?
3. The Quest for Quality - Do we know it when we see it?
4. How can we communicate High Expectations?
5. Who is in charge of Learning? The teacher? Or the student?

# Context (I): Scales

- \* Context of culture
- \* Context of situation
- \* context of interaction

# Context (2): Macrofunctions

- \* **Field:** Topic; What's going on?
- \* **Tenor:** Who? Interpersonal Relations, Roles
- \* **Mode:** How? Channel, Text, Genre

# Agency

- \* Initiative
- \* Intentionality
- \* Control
- \* Self-Regulation
- \* Self-Efficacy

# Self/Identity

## Self

- \* A stable “core”
- \* Aim: to preserve one’s integrity

## Identity

- \* Ways of matching, relating, reconciling Self to World

# Towards Quality

- \* Teach perception, and how to talk about it
- \* Promote agency by giving learners choices and voices, letting them have “things to say”
- \* High expectations, high challenge, high support
- \* Use of L1 to promote L2 development
- \* Include authentic and dynamic assessment alongside “official” tests
- \* Promote collaborative language use

# A Worthy Goal?

Maria Montessori has said:

“The greatest sign of success for a teacher ... is to be able to say, ‘The children are now working as if I did not exist.’”

Maria Montessori

Thank you!

[Ivanlier@miis.edu](mailto:Ivanlier@miis.edu)