The Ecology of Language Learning

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Below, I will comment briefly on each slide.

1. The presentation is based on many years of work on language classrooms, language pedagogy, curriculum design, and exploring the interfaces between practice, research and theory. I started moving in the direction of an ecological approach in the late 1980s, especially after reading J. J. Gibson's book on the ecology of visual perception, and the work of G. Bateson on the ecology of mind. In this presentation I outline some practical and theoretical ramifications of an ecological approach.

2. This shows the reason why I couldn't make it to Rome this weekend. The picture reminds us how a volcano in Iceland can be connected to a conference in Rome and a would-be conference plenary speaker in California. In an ecological perspective, everything is potentially related to everything else.

3. Goethe of course had a romantic streak. Scientists like to be more hard-nosed, but even so we need to bear in mind that all theories ultimately must be connected to real life, if they are to survive.

4. I included this picture (which I took while on an early morning hike with my son at the Pinnacles national monument in central California). I like the think it expresses Goethe's thought. The tree is steaming back to life in the early sunshine , after an icy night.

5. This diagram indicates that the WORK of teaching and learning incorporates practice, research and teaching in equal measure.

6. Kurt Lewin's famous statement. He was a social and organizational psychologist immigrated from the Soviet Union. He also argued that theory should not be separated from practice.

7. However, we need to realize that there are often conflicts and friction between theoretical and practical pursuits. Ecology strives to overcome such conflicts.

8. I included this lithograph of Escher called "Three Worlds" to illustrate the "layered simultaneity" that Blommaert talks about. This means that any utterance can carry several layers of meaning, just as there are three"worlds" in the Escher picture. First the world of the surface, the water with leaves floating on it. Second, the world below the water, with a catfish faintly visible. Third, the world above, with sky and trees reflected on the water's surface. This relates to the clip (which is on YouTube, it's from the movie Entre les Murs – hope you can find it). The girls' comments can be seen as carrying multiple layers of meaning.

9. The clip from Entre le Murs: it's on YouTube, though I don't have the exact URL. You probably won't be able to show it.

10. The rough transcript of the clip. The girls complain why he always uses "Bill" instead of names that the students in the class might have. At the literal level, they want to know why he doesn't use their names. At another level, the grammatical exercises are impersonal impositions of the school curriculum. At yet another level, the students feel their identities are not validated in the school system.

11. From the same film, the teacher gives the students an assignment to write an essay about their feelings. The students complain that nobody's interested, their lives are just drab and uneventful. The teacher says he's interested, but the students say that he's just saying that because he's the teacher, but it's not real. It's all fake.

12. I'm currently working on elaborating on these concepts. The ones that I want to highlight are agency, identity, quality. In the above clips from the French film, students display their struggles with identity in the school system, but they feel their sense of identity and agency are not engaged in the schoolwork.
In terms of quality, I make a distinction between quantified measures of educational success (test scores) and the quality of the educational experience. The papers in the references by S. B. Heath, and B. Rogoff address isues of quality.

13. This slide introduces some ways of thinking about the extracts that are printed in the next 8 slides. I refer to the paper on agency in the classroom that I sent.

14-20. The extracts. There is a video clip for 19-20, but it is too big to send.

21. This data extract is not in the paper I sent, it is from the new book by Walqui and van Lier (see references). It illustrates the struggles students may face in appropriating academic subject matter language. This is also an issue that is very relevant to CLIL classes in Europe.

22. This slide lists some key questions we can ask when examining what goes on in our classrooms. They lead to a focus that is somewhat different from the questions that are usually addressed in classroom research (but see the work of Dick Allwright).

23 -25. These slides address the notion of context, from a systemic functional perspective (Halliday's work).

25-26. These slides address aspects of agency, identity and motivation.

27. Some recommendations. One that would require elaboration would be the one that supports the use of L1, which may be controversial. The notion I would stress here is that addressed in the study by Creese and Blackledge (see references) on TRANSLANGUAGING.

28. I like this Montessori quote. I suppose Italian teachers will be familiar with it and with Montessori's educational theories.