AFFORDANCES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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> 'Perhaps, after all, we 'learn' language in the same way that an animal 'learns' the forest, or a plant 'learns' the soil. ' (van Lier 2000, p. 259)

1. Introduction

Learners' experiences have been gaining increasing attention in Applied Linguistics. Breen (2001) brings the learners to the front stage of Applied Linguistics by gathering a team of scholars to discuss *Learner Contributions to Language Learning.* On the same track, several researchers such as Benson and Voller (1997), Benson, (2001), Paiva (2005), Paiva and Braga (2008), among many others, have been investigating the ability learners display on managing their own learning; and Kramsch (2002), Norton (2000) and others have been examining the interconnections between the learner and the social world with special emphasis on the construction of learner identity.

New perspectives were inaugurated by Larsen-Freeman (1997) and van Lier (2000) when the first started studying second language acquisition as a complex system and the second as an ecological phenomenon. In both perspectives, sensory, cognitive and affective processes are not seen in isolation, but studied as interrelated factors underlying second language acquisition processes. The ecological perspective, as explained by Tudor (2003, p. 10), 'involves exploring the deep script of human interaction with the learning process, not in isolation, but within the broader context of students' concerns, attitudes and perceptions.' The ecological approach favours studies conducted in a natural environment and not in isolation and, as a consequence, there is a shift from a focus on the acquisition of linguistic structures to language as a semiotic social practice.

In the ecological perspective a new concept, affordance, introduced into our field by van Lier (2000, 2004, 2008), represents a turn in the way we understand how languages are learned. Having van Lier's ideas as support, complemented by other studies in ecology such as Gibson (1986) and Polechová and Storch (2008), this chapter discusses EFL learning beyond the classroom by showing how learners perceive affordances in contexts outside school and act on their environments to acquire the language. It is my contention that a dialogue between theory and students' own voices

can enrich our understanding of how languages are learned. In order to do that, I will quote some language learning histories (LLHs) written by students from Brazil, Japan, and Finland. Narrative research has proved to be a rich methodology to collect data and to make students' voices heard. I believe that anyone interested to know how languages are learned should pay attention to what learners have to tell us.

In the next section, I will present some definitions for affordance and discuss the concept as applied to language learning.

2. The concept of affordance

The concept of affordance comes from studies in ecology, an area which investigates the interrelation between an organism and the other elements in an ecosystem. It was coined by Gibson (1986), an American psychologist, in his seminal book about visual perception. For Gibson (1986, p. 127), 'affordances of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill' and 'refers to both the environment and the animal.' He explains that 'it implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.' As an example of affordance he presents the terrestrial surfaces and their different affordances: a track in a forest affords walking, a knee-high surface above the ground affords sitting, a surface of water affords swimming, etc. Men can also modify the surfaces by cutting, cleaning, paving, etc. so as to change the affordances.

Affordances are directly linked to the idea of perception and action. Perception is seen not as a mental capacity, but as an ecological phenomenon, the result of the animal's interaction in the environment. Animals, including humans, perceive what the niche offers them (substances, medium, objects, etc.), interpret the affordances and act upon them. Some actions are done automatically (e.g. drinking water) and others require complex cognitive processes (e.g. finding the solution for a problem). As far as language is concerned, we can say it affords uses restricted by the user's perceptions.

In Applied Linguistics, van Lier (2000, 2004, 2008) gathers different definitions of affordance. In van Lier (2000, p. 253), he presents two definitions. The first comes from Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991, p. 2003): 'affordances consist in the opportunities for interaction that things in the environment possess relative to sensoriomotor capacities of the animal.' The second is reproduced from Shotter and Newson (1982, p. 34) who understand affordance as 'demands and requirements, opportunities and limitations, rejections and invitations, enablements and constraints.'

In van Lier (2004, p. 91), he adds two more definitions, one by Neisser (1987, p. 21), 'Affordances are relations of possibility between animals and their environments,' and another by Forrester (1999, p. 88) who provides a definition for affordance, in the context of language, as 'immediately recognizable projections, predictions and perceived consequences of making this (and not that) utterance at any given time.'

Van Lier (2004, p. 91) highlights the key notions in those definitions – relations, possibility, opportunity, immediacy, and interaction –, and adds that 'affordance refers to what is available to the person to do something with' and says that 'more accurately, it is *action in potential* and it emerges as we interact with the physical and social world' (p.92). Stoffregen (2003, p. 115), in Sahin et al (2007, p. 455), also sees affordances as emergencies. For Stoffregen, 'affordances are properties of the animal–environment system, that is, that they are emergent properties that do not inhere in either the environment or the animal.' In Stoffregen's definition, affordance is portrayed neither as a property of the environment nor as a property of the individual, but as something which emerges from the interaction between both. In Chemero's words (2003, p.181), also in Sahin et al (2007, p. 456), 'affordances are relations between the abilities of organisms and features of the environment.'

A proof that affordances are not properties of the environment is the fact that different individuals have different perceptions of the world and that the complementarity and interaction between individuals and the environment emerge from different social practices. See, for instance, how artists are able to perceive the possibilities offered by trash and transform them into art; how a good gardener can transform a piece of land into a beautiful garden; or how EFL learners living in similar niches (see section 3) can have different perceptions, which afford them different experiences, and, consequently, different language development. The emergent nature of affordances suggests that they are best understood in social practices.

The idea that the perception and interpretation of the environment affords certain linguistic social practices has been influencing the way we look at the language learning phenomenon. Van Lier (2000, p. 246) defends that 'from an ecological perspective, the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings. These meanings are available gradually as the learner acts within and with the environment'. For him, action, perception and interpretation, in a continuous cycle of mutual reinforcement, are preconditions for the emergence of meaning (van Lier 2004, p. 92).

We can say that emergence happens when one responds to opportunities for interaction, to demands and constraints, or to offerings and obstacles, reorganizing and adapting themselves to the changing conditions in a niche. In the next section, I will discuss the concept of niche and its implications for language development.

3. The concept of niche

Each species occupies a niche, defined by Gibson as a set of affordances. 'The niche implies a kind of animal, and the animal implies a kind of niche' (Gibson 1986, p. 129). He explains that:

> There are all kinds of nutrients in the world and all sorts of ways of getting food; all sorts of shelters or hiding places, such as holes, crevices, and caves; all sorts of materials for *making* shelters, nests, mounds, huts; all kinds of locomotion that the environment makes possible, such as swimming, crawling, walking, climbing, flying. These offerings have been taken advantage of; the niches have been occupied. But, for all we know, there may be many offerings of the environment that have *not* been taken advantage of, that is, niches not yet occupied.

A niche has to do with the relational position of an individual in its biome. As Polechová and Storch (2008, p.1) put it, 'ecological niche characterizes the position of a species within an ecosystem, comprising species habitat requirements as well as its functional role.' Actions performed by an individual influence the niche and the niche influences the individual by offering opportunities for his/her actions or by constraining them.

Polechová and Storch (2008) distinguish three approaches to niche: (1) niche as the description of a species' habitat requirement; (2) niche as an ecological function of the species; and (3) niche as a species position in a community. In an attempt to understand these approaches in relation to language learning, I would translate these approaches as (1) niche as an environment mediated by language; (2) niche as a place to act in by using the language; and (3) niche as a language user position in a discourse community.

In order to be successful, a learner must make a living in his/her niche. The student has to coexist with other learners and sometimes compete for his/her position in the niche, mainly when one is in a classroom environment. In addition, the resources usually available in a classroom are insufficient for successful language acquisition.

Learners must look for affordances beyond the classroom and not all of them will be able to perceive the affordances or take advantage of all the ones offered by the environment.

Gibson (1986, p. 141) says that 'to perceive the world is to copercieve oneself' and explains that 'the awareness of the world and of one's complementary relati ons to the world are not separable.' In fact, we perceive things in accordance with the way it relates to us, in accordance to our identity. While one sees a tea pot as a container to hold tea, another can see it as an ornament to hold flowers. The same happens with language. A musician can listen to a song without paying attention to the lyrics , but to the sounds from a specific instrument, while a language learner may pay attention to the meaning or to the way words are pronounced.

An ecological perspecti ve sees the learner as situated in his/her specific niche. As pointed out by Berglund (2009, p. 187), 'this is in line with socio-cultural theories of learning, where the learner is seen as situated in a specific culture and where learning takes place through interaction with the environment, including artefacts and other human beings.' She adds that 'from a socio-cultural perspective on learning, communicative affordances are, in fact, also affordances for language learning. '

We use language to think, to perceive and interpret the linguistic social actions around us and to act in our niches. In the case of foreign language learning, a kind of affordance, which has a great impact on the learners, is how they relate to that language, that is, how they perceive the language they learn. A second or other language can be seen as a dominating instrument; as a tool for communication; as a cultural productio n mediator; as an instrument which opens windows for business, as something of high or low prestige, and so on. As an example, I would like to mention the case of a Brazilian heavy metal band, Sepultura (http://sepultura.uol.com.br/v6/en/), which is internationally known. In the eighties, their ex-leader, Max Cavalera, said, during a TV interview in Brazil, that he had tried to make up songs in Portuguese but that had not worked. He then decided to compose in English and the results were very good. In Cavalera's perception, Portuguese does not afford adequate sonority for their music style.

In the next section, I will describe how some English language learners from three different continents perceive affordances and act in their niches. To do that, I will resort to language learning histories from the AMFALE databank. AMFALE is an acronym in Portuguese for the rese arch project 'Learning with the memories of speakers and learners of foreign languages.' The project has a digital databank which hosts

corpora of language learning histories written by Brazilian, Japanese, Chinese and Finnish students and can be found at http://www.veramenezes.com/amfale.htm. It is worth mentioning that the LLHs excerpts I chose as examples have not been edited.

4. Affordances in EFL/ESL niches

Taking into account the idea of **niche as an environment mediated by language**, English language learners must belong to a habitat where they can find language affordances. Van Lier (2004, p. 95) says that 'language affordances, whether natural or cultural, direct or indirect are relations of possibility among language users.' In a context such as the Brazilian one, where the official language is Portuguese, finding natural affordances in the niche is not common for Brazilians. Even so, we can find reports of this in early childhood experiences. See, for instance, what a Brazilian girl in excerpt (1) and a Brazilian boy in (2) tell us:

> (1) I remember well my very first contact with a foreign language (see that I am "literally" talking about contact, it means, I had no idea about what I was dealing with): I was about eight years old, was walking with my father in the center of Belo Horizonte city when just in front of the "Oton Palace Hotel" I heard a tall man talking to some people in a strange manner. Well, at that time I had no idea that it could be English (neither my poor father) but I knew that I wished (from that moment and as a curious child) learn to talk just the way that man was talking.

> (2) My first contact with English was when I was a kid. I and my brother were in a movie watching "Tom and Jerry" we were enjoying and of course the result was a lot of noise. Suddenly two foreign kids sitting in front of us turned and screamed "quiet please". I could not understand but we shut up because of surprise, and after this day my interest in English arose in my mind. I remember by this day I was trying to guess the names of the objects in English, just by myself in secret.

The experiences reported in excerpts (1) and (2) seem to fit the kind of affordance van Lier (2004, p. 100) labels as level 1 and which he associates with 'Peirce's Firstness, the realm of direct feeling, quality, emotion.' I would complement it by saying that this kind of experience could be understood as a mere sensation, as a *rheme*, defined by Peirce (1940/1955, p.103) as 'a Sign, which, for its Interpretant, is a Sign of qualitative Possibility, that is, understood as representing such and such a kind of possible Object. Any Rheme, perhaps, will afford some information; but it is not interpreted as doing so.' The narrators had the feeling that they were listening to another

language, but they could not understand it. Narrator (1) was not even able to name the language he heard in front of the hotel. Nevertheless, the rhematic experience afforded them the desire to learn that language.

In EFL niches, language affordances are not the same for every learner. There are contexts which offer more opportunities for language learning and fewer constraints than others and vice-versa. To learn English where it is spoken is supposed to imply more language affordances than in countries where there are fewer chances to use the language as in Japan or Brazil. Nevertheless, learners in those countries may have lots of opportunities to be in contact with English by means of countless cultural productions such as songs, movies and TV shows. They may also travel to an English speaking country. The following LLHs are examples of similar travelling experiences told by learners from Brazil (3), Finland (4), and Japan (5). In (3), one can realize that the narrator found not only language learning affordanc es, but also a niche for a better life.

> (3) (…) my marriage union to the English language was finally sealed when I pulled up stakes to the States, the land of the green currency, a land of hopes of better days to come in contrast with those years lived at my birthplace, full of green, but short of hopes.

In (4) and (5), students talk about their experiences as exchange students in the USA. Living in an environment where English is spoken represents an increase in language affordances. It is interesting to see that, although they were enrolled in schools, they do not talk about classroom experiences, but about "using everyday language" and "experiencing a different culture."

> (4) When I'm thinking of myself as a language learner the first thing that comes to my mind is my year in the U.S. as an exchange student. That was the year I learned a lot obviously. (…) During that year I learned to use everyday language pretty well because I had no option but to express myself.

> (5) My most memorable experience wa s going to the United States to study English for one year. Needless to say, I improved my English skill, especially in listening. But I could also experience a different culture. I learned how to spend a day at an American high school, activities in bands, and ceremonies like a graduation commencement. All the people who I got to know there were so nice that they did not mind at all to explain the meanings of words I did not understand. It really helped me to learn English and I still remember the words th ey taught me, including

slang. I think I was so lucky to go there. I could learn a lot and have American friends who I still keep in touch with.

These three English learners live in three different continents – South America, Europe and Asia – and all of them belong to niches which offer similar poor English language affordances, but they had the chance to enlarge their niches by travelling to the United States where more affordances were available in the form of meaningful activities and participation in the American culture. Narrators occupied a position in the discourse community and that contributed to their SLA because English was required to act in this new niche.

Nevertheless, travelling is not always a guarantee of more affordances as we can see in (6), in the words of a Brazilian narrator.

> (6) I got married when I was about 20 years old and when I was 24, my husband went to do a Ph.D course in the USA and we stayed there for about 4 years and that's how I learned. I met so many Brazilian 'wives' that even after a few years there didn't learn anything because in some universities there were so many other Brazilian wives and they were always together talking in Portuguese. Quite a lot of them came back to Brazil with an English that is not enough to teach the very beginners.
> I was lucky again because we went to Missouri and there were no more than 2 or 3 Brazilian couples besides us. So I looked for courses I could do to fill my time and I ended up in a college doing a Photography course, another one was about cooking and in a few months I was working as a baby sitter on the weekends and had a job during the week in the photo lab developing films, etc.

In (6), we can see that lnguage affordances are not properties of the niche, but they emerge from language use, from the participation of the learners in a niche, from those with whom they interact in social practices. Although those women were in the United States, living in an environment full of possibilities to use the English language, they did not perceive the same affordances as the narrator in (6) did. As Gibson and Pick (2000, p.16) tell us, 'fundamentally, the realization of an affordance requires that animal and environment be adapted for one another.' It seems that, in the case of these Brazilian women, the co-adaptation did not happen as it did with our narrator. They did not perceive speaking English as relevant to them and thus their activities favoured the inner niche and, as a consequence, Portuguese language use.

A good amount of LLHs in the AMFALE databank, as the ones told in (3), (4) and (5), reveal that students perceive the classroom as a place which does not afford enough language experiences for them to learn English. They complain that their

schools had offered them fragmented samples of the language which did not afford them communicative agency, but only meaningless and mechanical manipulation of linguistic structures. That is the case of the Brazilian narrator in (7).

> (7) My first experience in learning English was pretty much the same as my colleges who studied in public schools. The exercises were based on copy, memorize and research about the grammar. The teachers used to plan all classes according to the book adopted for all the school which contained only structural exercises. Sometimes the teacher made some listening exercises with songs (always fill the gap) but in most cases were songs that that students didn't know or a stile we didn't like.

Most students perceive language affordance as "speak it", but many teachers see it as "describe it/talk about it." The students' concept of what a language is does not match their teachers' own concept. In spite of their niches, which apparently offer poor English language affordances, many learners bridge the gaps by looking for affordances beyond the classrooms and that meets the second concept of niche: **niche as a place to act in by using the language**. They are aware of their roles as language learners and try to find opportunities to interact with English speakers, as we can see in excerpt (8).

> (8) I've working in a hotel and receive all the moment foreign guests. I talk to them so much and I think it's because this I didn't forget my English yet. We must be even practicing to learn more and more. It's the most important thing I consider to learn a good language.

The Brazilian narrator in (8) perceives his job as an opportunity to keep up with the language. He is aware that he must use the language to learn it.

Learners also look for cultural productions (songs, movies, literature, games, etc.). They act by reading books and magazines, by listening to songs, watching movies (see excerpt (9) from Finland), by writing e-mails, by reading the news, by playing games, etc. Affordances are around learners, as the Japanese narrator in (10) acknowledges. It is up to the learners to perceive what their niches offer them and act.

> (9) There were not many language learning options in the grade school. Teachers' methods were very conservative. At the time, that didn't bother me because I couldn't imagine any other ways to learn. I began reading magazines and books in English when I was about ten years old. That helped me a lot. I wasn't always very eager to do my homework – but I was interested in reading English football magazines, listening to American rock music and watching Anglo-American movies. Therefore, it wasn't difficult for me to succeed in the grade school.

(10) Everything around us like books, TV, friends could be a teacher for us. I think that how much we can learn depends on how much we make efforts.

Excerpts (8), (9) and (10) demonstrate that the three narrators learned to take advantage of affordances, that there was a fit between the environmental properties and the possibilities for learning.

The third type of niche is of **niche as a language user's position in a discourse community**. A learner who assumes the position of a language user is expected to be successful in his attempt to learn the language. The following examples show students who can perceive their positions in discourse communities.

(11) I remember reading many things in English: from shampoos labels to whole books. I have over twenty relatives living in the US nowadays, and they'd send me many things: books, magazines, candies etc. It sure has motivated me, being curious the way I am, to understand whatever was written on these things. A great jump in my English as second language came in '97, when I went to the US for the first time. I remember that in four months I was fluent. That was my goal when I went there, I was not ashamed that I never had the chance of speaking English in Brazil, but the place I was, and the context were different: I had to talk to communicate, whether at home or at work, English was the only way out.

In (11), we can see how the Brazilian narrator assumed the role of an English reader, perceiving all the reading affordances which were available to her. She used to read everything, including shampoo labels, which are usually ignored by most shampoo users. She learned to realize affordances unavailable to most students. Later on, she assumed the role of a speaker in order to belong to her extended niche. A similar example can be found in the words of a Finnish student in (13).

(13) I feel that I have started to become braver to use english. I read a lot books in english for fun and that has certainly helped me to widen my vocabulary. I also have started to pick up things and words from television and search information from internet in english. Luckily I have an english friend whom I see quite a lot and I try to speak with her many different kinds of things. Sometimes I'm a bit worried about my grammar but now I understand it's not the most important part of english learning.

The learner in (13) frees herself from grammar dictatorship, as her school 'mostly concentrated on grammar and vocabulary', and becomes a "braver" speaker. She reads for fun and speaks English with an English friend. She found affordances beyond the classroom, although she acknowledges the importance of formal language

studies when she says "part of me is very grateful of that, because it has given me a quite solid base of them."

Our last example also shows a learner who assumes her position as a letter writer.

> (14) I have been exchanging letters with American, Canadian and Korean friends since I was 12 years old. At first, I couldn't express what I wanted to write, and I copied expressions from books. But now I can write what I want to write to some extent. Writing letters in English was very very useful for me. I could learn a lot of things about America, Canada and Korea. I enjoyed exchanging letters very much, and I want to continue it forever. Now, I am happy because I can exchange E-mail with foreign friends. E-mail is easier to send than letters.

Language affords a variety of uses (singing, chatting, reading, writing, listening and so forth), but some teachers insist on focusing only on the formal aspects of the language. In the case of the Japanese learner in (14), English affords her interaction with friends by writing letters and then emails. She is a university student who assumed her role as letter writer when she was twelve and later on became an e-mail writer.

5. Conclusions

To tell a LLH is necessarily an act of talking about affordances and some of these affordances do not belong to the school world. They are beyond the classrooms and researchers usually do not have access to them. Narrative research has proved to be an effective methodology to examine those experiences and thus contribute to our understanding of SLA.

By examining the LLHs in the AMFALE databank, we realize that affordances beyond the classrooms are essential elements in the processes of language learning. These affordances manifest themselves in written and oral interactions with other individuals in the inner or in the extended niches and in experiences with cultural productions (books, magazines, songs, movies, games, etc.). Those narrators perceive the language as something which affords use, agency, and not merely structural manipulation. A group of narrators also register their perceptions that the classroom does not afford enough opportunities for language agency. They strive to find more affordances beyond the classroom in order to develop the language and by doing so they prove that they can change their environment and reconstruct their niches.

By resorting to LLHs told in Brazil, Finland and Japan, we could see that students in different niches are likely to perceive more affordances in out-of-class

experiences than in their educational contexts. Our LLH corpora provide enough evidence for us to understand that learning a language is a matter of acting in the world, a matter of autonomy and agency.

The lesson we can learn from what the narrators say is that learners must be empowered to perceive affordances in their niches. We must acknowledge that schools alone cannot gather all the necessary affordances for language development and open our students' eyes to the world around them. As Ziglari (2008, p. 378) emphasizes in her own study 'it is better for the teacher to expose the learners to the real and natural settings so that they could perceive their world much better and increase their world knowledge.' Van Lier (2000, p.260) tells us that 'perhaps, after all, we 'learn' language in the same way that an animal 'learns' the forest, or a plant 'learns' the soil.' Having this in mind, I would like to suggest that our role as teachers is to help learners occupy their niches by using the languages they are learning.

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