



## An ecological approach to language pedagogy, programs, and departments

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### Abstract

*Responding to persistent criticisms of post-secondary language education, this article frames the language program in an ecological perspective. The long-discussed curricular and administrative bifurcation of language departments is cast as a symptom rather than cause of tensions and limitations of post-secondary language education. Moving beyond binary categorization and a limited focus on the department, an ecological approach instead views the department as a complex dynamic system and postmodern and postcolonial theory as a macro-level component of the system that can serve as a counterforce to neoliberal pressures that undermine language education in the United States. Implications of an ecological approach are detailed, including proposals for it to become the new normal for pedagogy, language programs, and departments.*

**Keywords:** *ecological approaches, complex dynamic systems theory, language program direction, language pedagogy*

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### Introduction

In their 2010 AAUSC volume, *Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy*, Levine and Phipps offered models for practices that would bridge the perennial theory-practice divide in foreign language education (Levine & Phipps, 2012). Each of the contributions saw theory—with a range of approaches represented—not as something abstract and remote from practice, but as part of its very habitus. A key practical aim of the volume was to address the proposals of the much-discussed 2007 Modern Language Association ad hoc committee report (MLA ad hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, henceforth MLA Report). Those proposals argued that post-secondary language departments needed to address the negative effects of bifurcated curriculum and departmental structures, and also, that they should be fostering “deep translingual and transcultural competence” through a more holistic and integrated approach to language and culture learning in languages other than English than was the norm to that point (MLA, 2008, p. 236). The 2010 volume also grappled with the complexities and increasing diversity of language and language learning in a globalized world. The theoretical orientations of the contributions ranged from cognitive grammar to postcolonial theory and from hermeneutics to critical pedagogy. Yet, by and large, the contributions all shared a view of language as inherently dynamic and fluid, language learning and teaching as context-contingent and usage-driven, and language learners as developing multilingual beings.

Two issues were raised by Phipps and Levine (2012b) in their introductory chapter. First, they observed that language pedagogy was largely atheoretical, too focused on skills development and success in transactional communication and divorced from the larger aims of academia and the humanities. And second, they asserted that language education was not realizing its potential to help address some of the

world's most pressing problems, including political, societal, and institutional inequality, human conflict, and damaging consequences of human migration, among others. The volume thus invited reflection on various aspects of language teaching and our profession, with each chapter investigating a different theoretical trend or position in education, applied linguistics, or formal linguistics and also presenting practical models for curriculum and teaching. For example, Kramsch's contribution put some theoretical flesh on the bones of the MLA's framing of translingual/transcultural competence, which had until that time—and arguably since—come across as a fairly nebulous construct, open to highly various interpretations and thus misuse, as well as difficult to observe or evaluate (Kramsch, 2012, 2013; Levine et al., 2008). In an inherently practical yet sophisticated bridging of theory and practice, Gramling and Warner drew on Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) notion of the habitus to develop what they termed *contact pragmatics* for the teaching of literature to advanced language learners and overcome some of the persistent limitations of that instructional setting. Urlaub bridged hermeneutics and language pedagogy in a new and exciting way, and Train developed a welcome postcolonial reading of language pedagogy for pursuit of a “decolonial foreign language teaching” (2012, p. 156). Arens argued for giving the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages World-Readiness Standards for Languages (ACTFL Standards) (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) a more central role in addressing the proposals of the MLA Report, and van Lier offered a thumbnail treatment of an ecological approach by unpacking ways to forge connections between classroom settings and students' lives beyond the classroom. Overall, the contributions urged language professionals to move beyond what Phipps and Levine considered to be innovative but individualized curricula or initiatives that responded to trends in the scholarly literature but did not necessarily reverberate in or ultimately alter mainstream post-secondary language education, “potentially doomed to wither on the vine when they are in the hothouse environment of skills and grades and functional performance” (Phipps & Levine, 2012a, p. 229).

The 2010 AAUSC volume appeared in the middle of what many have recognized as a long-term paradigm shift in applied linguistics, variously described as the social, multilingual, and critical turn (Block, 2003, Díaz, 2013; Díaz & Dasli, 2017; May, 2014; Ortega, 2014, 2019). Though these shifts lie in different strands of work—some concerned with accounting for individual learning and others with larger discourses in language education—they have in common postmodern understandings of language, knowledge, learning, and power relations in society in general, and educational institutions in particular. These shifts were reflected in contributions to the 2010 volume, as well as in some aspects of standards frameworks such as the ACTFL Standards and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). We contend that a new normal is beginning to emerge unsystematically and that the time is ripe for those paradigm shifts to be brought into larger application, with the aim of realizing the relationship between theory and practice as envisioned by van Lier when he asserted that theory, research, and practice are “an essential unity in the process of doing curriculum; theorizing, researching, and practicing are...inseparable ingredients in the professional conduct of the language educator” (1996, p. 2–3).

As part of this special issue of *Second Language Research and Practice* commemorating 30 years of the AAUSC's annual volumes on issues in language program direction, our focus here will not be on language education writ large, but rather on one component of it: the U. S. post-secondary language program and department. As we will argue, an approach informed by the advances made in postmodern, postcolonial, and social justice theories in recent decades that also locates the language program in the ecology of the department, institution, and society, allows language professionals to confront the insidious structural limitations and power dynamics that the MLA Report, Reagan and Osborn (2019), and numerous other scholars have pointed out and described. Likewise, an approach informed by postmodern, postcolonial, and social justice theories can help the profession address how language education is not realizing its potential to help address some of the world's most pressing problems as raised by Phipps and Levine, and more recently exclaimed by Macedo (2019) in his introduction to the volume, *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Colonial Languages*. Although much has been made of the supposed transformation of language departments as “new structures for a changed world” (MLA, 2007,

p. 234), as Dupuy and Michelson declare “large-scale paradigm change has not yet occurred” (2021, p. 2), and much of the work undertaken since 2007 stands as “promising *isolated* [emphasis added] pockets of change” (Lomicka & Lord, 2018, p. 117). In the following, we expand upon the contributions of 2019 AAUSC volume by taking on what we see as a deep and resistant conventionality and the perception of an intransigent hierarchical structure which continues to impede the transformation of language departments. In short, we propose an *ecological* framing of language pedagogy, language programs and departments toward realizing the reforms envisioned in the 2010 AAUSC volume, the 2007 MLA Report, and numerous other scholarly works (e.g., Kumaravadivelu 2003; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

To accomplish this, in the next section we critique the long-discussed bifurcation of departments. In Part 3, we present and clarify our vision of an ecological approach and sketch how we see its agents, elements, and processes as part of a complex, dynamic system deeply implicated by postmodern and postcolonial theories.<sup>1</sup> Throughout, we highlight several notable studies of program reforms, theory-based curricular approaches, and innovative language education reframings, which together constitute “hot house” projects and “isolated pockets of change” that have not yet reached a critical mass to tip language education overall (Lomicka & Lord, 2018, p. 117), but through an ecological perspective can be regarded as part of a common project in language programs, departments, and institutions. We conclude in Part 4 with a set of implications and proposals that language professionals can apply to take advantage of inherent interconnections and thereby confront resistant conventionalities, neo-liberal, and as Kramersch (2019, p. 58) described it, neo-colonial global pressures.

### **Long-Lamented Bifurcation as Symptom Rather than Cause**

Complaints about the problems emerging from the hierarchical and structural characteristics of language departments have by and large not achieved what they were intended to achieve: the wholesale reform of post-secondary language education toward the intercultural and educational ideals elucidated by numerous scholars from Hymes (1972) to Ortega (2019). Well before the MLA Report was drafted, James (1997) bemoaned the split between lower-level language courses and upper-level content (often, literature) classes with concomitant division of labor. Since that time, and with increased emphasis and attention on the 2007 MLA Report, numerous articles and studies have described and proposed curricular changes, innovative course designs, departmental restructurings, and vertical articulation projects (Byrnes, 2001; Byrnes & Sprang, 2004; Maxim et al., 2013; Paesani et al., 2016; Paesani & Barrette, 2005; Reeser, 2013; Swaffar & Arens, 2005). Today, we can say with surety that there is much creativity engaged across the curriculum in countless institutions throughout North America. For example, social justice approaches have provided models for using fairy-tales in first-year classes to interrogate gender norms (Meredith et al., 2018) and a variety of holiday advertisements to critically confront cultural stereotypes (Tarnawska Senel, 2020). It has also promoted community and civic engagement as an instrumental aspect of language learning (Miñana, 2016). Multiliteracies approaches have further helped some departments rethink their curriculum to focus on form and register while deepening cultural and literary knowledge (Bono & Bilbao Terreros, 2018; see also Paesani et al., 2016). Graduate student teacher education also has undergone transformation, expanding out from communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches to literacy and genre-based ones (Bournes & Melin, 2014; Kern, 1995, 2000). It has also, in some contexts, expanded in scope to include a second semester graduate teaching methods course to provide additional pedagogical support (Allen, 2014). Additionally, several departments now include graduate students as contributors to or co-designers of curricular units and courses (Byrnes 2001; Höbusch & Worley, 2012) and more recently, of grassroots instructional materials projects.

Yet despite these innovative approaches and projects, we must agree with Bernhardt (2018), who contended that the status quo in multi-section language departments has remained largely structurally stagnant. Language specialists and literature faculty still generally work on separate ends of the curriculum (see also Allen, 2009), loosely held together by the chair who, despite often not teaching in the language sequence directly, works in tandem with the language program directors (LPDs) and instructors of courses beyond

the language sequence. Although there has been a shift in many colleges and universities in the lower-level curriculum towards integrating substantive content learning, upper-level coursework built on principles for developing advanced language capacities remains an exception (Byrnes, 2006; Byrnes et al., 2011; see, however, Reeser, 2013, which is an excellent counter-example of departmental integration). As Pfeiffer (2008) predicted, this general failure is not surprising: lower-level courses already had a rather fixed and generally accepted set of language forms as learning objects before the MLA Report (in part due to mainstream textbooks); upper-level courses, however, which were then tasked with identifying and scaffolding instruction to support “advanced language goals,” had and have had fewer explicit guidelines delineating “advancedness” (p. 297). This is in no small part due to the limited role both applied linguists and applied linguistics as a field play in most language departments. As Kramsch (2019) explained, given the continued trivialization of applied linguistics in most departments, and thereby in the educational trajectories of newly-minted professoriate, “FL education at the college level is still under the hegemony of the linguistics and literature professoriate” and many of our own colleagues are missing out on opportunities to ask the most pressing and necessary questions of our field that would initiate sustainable change (p. 61).

Thus, despite the proliferation of solutions, fixes, and retooling that resulted from the MLA Report and related scholarly work (e.g. James, 1997; Levine et al., 2008), we contend that the binary concept put forward in and continually referenced from the MLA Report delimits deep change and forward movement in the profession. In particular, it obfuscates an ecological holism that exists in the department as a complex dynamic system. Conceptualizing the department through binary categories and approaches that propose to fix the perceived divide, shrouds—if not stymies—inherent interconnections, spheres of influence, and mutual collaboration. This is a key aspect that several criticisms of the report have noted over the years: Instead of visualizing faculty as falling squarely into one of two camps, the department should be viewed as a “multidimensional puzzle made up of the diverse identities of faculty members and language teachers” (Levine et al., 2008, p. 244). In addition, the conceptualization of bifurcation “ultimately cements the structural and intellectual status quo” and exacerbates inequalities already in its very terminology (Bernhardt, 2018, p. 107). Finally, the MLA Report has led many to view this perceived split as the cause rather than a symptom of more insidious dysfunction: hierarchies of power and resistant conventionality regarding labor and curricular divisions that results in departments and individual agents eschewing connection. What is needed, we believe, is a model that sheds light on the variety of intertwined elements, interests, actions, values, and agents across the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. It is our hope that such a model can bolster the department and program in a way that helps counter hierarchies of power, elitism, and the neoliberal pressures that eat away at the overall departmental ecology. In the next section, we present our model of such an ecological approach, which encompasses an overview of its main characteristics, participating agents and processes, and ideological and political underpinnings.

## **What is an Ecological Approach?**

There are two main features of the ecological approach we propose here. The first is an understanding of the whole as a complex dynamic system. The second takes a postmodern and postcolonial view of U.S. language education and the post-secondary language department within it.

### ***Language Programs and Departments from a Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective***

An ecological approach means describing language programs and departments as complex dynamic systems, while acknowledging that the department itself is (a) part of a greater complex dynamic system, namely language education in the U.S. context, and (b) composed of smaller interacting complex dynamic systems nested within it, such as language classrooms, and of course the individuals within them. One theoretical model that helps account for this framing of language and language learning is complex dynamic systems theory. Primarily applied to date in the study of second-language acquisition (de Bot et al., 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Levine, 2020; van Lier, 2004), it is also useful for examining the language program and department because the model is fundamentally about understanding and explaining

*change*, and language learning is wholly about change, first and foremost in and for the learner. As the Douglas Fir Group (2016, p. 29) observed, language learning “is a ceaseless moving target, with periods of stability but never stasis, and describable via probabilistic predictions but never via deterministic laws.” Language education as part of educational institutions is similarly about change, presumably positive change, both within the institution but also beyond it.

Though it is an oversimplification of the model, five key elements of complex dynamic systems define an ecological approach to language pedagogy and programs. First, in any natural ecosystem, such as an ocean or a forest, all elements are *interdependent*. Changes in one part of the system affect the other parts. Human social systems have come to be described in similar terms, given how sensitive to various aspects of context human interactions and behaviors are (Spivey, 2007). In educational settings, the implications of these interdependencies cannot be overstated: changes in one area influence alterations elsewhere. For example, access to professional development funds for an LPD can have an impact on programmatic and curricular decisions, the learners and the learning that takes place, and ultimately can emanate outward to society at large (Osborn, 2006). Recognizing interdependencies in the departmental culture and in the larger landscape of language learning is no trivial observation; it is the basis for all subsequent analysis and decision-making.

The nature of change in an ecological approach is also *nonlinear*, which means two things. First, small-scale changes can have a large impact. The classic illustration of non-linear change first raised by Lorenz (1972) of the butterfly in the rainforest unleashing a typhoon thousands of miles away is an example of a minute change having a disproportionately large impact on a system. Conversely, even large-scale changes may not affect the system in the way intended. Here, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) offered the example of a freeway: a new lane is added to ostensibly ease traffic flow, but the new lane attracts more cars and thus does not achieve its intended aim. In instructed second-language learning, an example of nonlinear change would be the relationship between the large amount of instructional time spent teaching grammatical structures and the actual outcomes of that instruction. With regard to the sequenced, four-year curriculum, the idea of non-linear change could be seen as problematic, for one would always wish to be able to predict outcomes of teaching, in the form of learning that can be assessed by various means; the implication of nonlinear change is that it is to some extent unpredictable. Yet this is the inherent nature of change, as reflected in the necessarily various outcomes of second-language learning. Awareness of this aspect of an ecological approach implies an intrinsic acceptance of it, including in the ways we frame desired outcomes for learners.

A third feature of complex dynamic systems is *co-adaptation*. Elements and agents in a system co-adapt to one another in situated context. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) illustrated this with a person treading water: both the person and the water co-adapt, allowing her to remain upright and afloat. In the classroom, this is evident in the ways learners work together, and the ways teachers modify their interactions in response to learners. Co-adaptation in this setting is akin to what teachers usually call scaffolding (Donato, 1994; van Lier, 2004). Recognizing co-adaptation as a salient feature of language programs and departments implies moving away from one-directionally hierarchical understandings of these relationships and activities, from student to teaching assistant (TA) or non-tenure track faculty to faculty to chair, underscoring instead the inherent multidirectionality of co-adaptation. For example, in a four-year curricular model, the program could be said to co-adapt to both the undergraduates as well as graduate-student instructors if space were opened for the graduate students to create instructional units or materials that respond to the students’ interests and/or that respond to their own scholarly interests, such that the curriculum is not done to them (Shor, 1996), rather they adapt to it while the curriculum adapts to them.

Complex dynamic systems also exist and operate simultaneously at *multiple timescales*. Different timescales are relevant depending on context and observer. For an applied linguist interested in working memory during L2 learning, timescales of milliseconds have salience; however, for someone focused on L2 learner grammatical development, the salient timescale may be weeks or months, and for a linguist analyzing intergenerational language shift, the appropriate timescale may be decades. Within the complex dynamic system of the department, relevant timescales can include the traditional instructional hours, the

academic term, and of course, the four-year sequence of the undergraduate curriculum, and the graduate curriculum. However, it also can relate to the life trajectory of individuals. Notably, in educational settings we have some measure of control over aspects of the timescales, especially if we are willing to re-envision when specific language forms and content will be taught across a four-year sequence.

Finally, a crucial dimension of complex dynamic systems is spatial. Systems operate at *multiple, nested spatial or social levels* simultaneously, and as with timescales, context and the observer determine which are relevant or salient at a given time. Thus, the classroom exists within a program, and a program within an institution, itself nested within a national culture with fluid sets of values and ideologies pertaining to language education, its perceived value, and so forth (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Ortega, 2019; Reagan & Osborn, 2019). Referring back to our first feature, each level affects all others and is interdependent. For example, as Bilbao Terreros and Bono (2021) recently demonstrated, departments that undergo curricular reforms while working within a greater institutional culture that itself affirms and promotes foreign-language learning as a way to foster students' global citizenship positively influence one another: Just as the institution recasts the value of language learning, "language programs are also contributing to redefining educational priorities and reshaping the contours of a liberal arts education" (p. 135). In this article, we offer an extension and hopefully deepening of the micro, meso, and macro scales proposed to describe language learning by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), themselves adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological model for human development.

As we understand it for the purpose of an ecological approach to the language program and department, the *micro-level* includes the agents (chair, LPD, tenure and non-tenure line faculty, graduate students, learners, staff, and others) and all social and pedagogical activity involved in language learning. This activity encompasses language use that takes advantage of "all available semiotic resources" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 27).

The *meso-level* entails linkages and processes between two or more settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 22; Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 25, 37); these pertain to local contexts, including departmental cultures, which vary widely in terms of their approaches to curriculum and organization, course offerings, staffing, teaching practices, assessments and how data from those assessments are used, professional development opportunities, promotion and tenure requirements, and the nature of the classroom spaces that the language program has at its disposal. It also includes the presence of heritage communities, educational resources, and, we would add, equity of access to education.

The *macro-level* consists of ideologies and beliefs that permeate and often shape these nested contexts (but, as we explain below, can and should also be challenged, influenced by, and changed from activities undertaken at the micro- and meso-levels), and that "intersect with social constructs such as identity, agency, language, learning, and education and social issues such as linguistic rights and language policies" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 37). In today's U.S. context, this includes public debates over migration and the role of languages in society or educational settings, neoliberal undercurrents driving trends that affect education, language learning's role in U.S. educational systems vis-à-vis the "ubiquitous discourse of internationalization" (Bilbao Terreros & Bono, 2021, p. 134), and fluctuations in geopolitical relationships that impact institutional decisions and individuals' own valuation of languages and language education (Block, 2010; Kramsch, 2019). Relatedly, macro-level factors or elements include national-level discourses, or rather, the published products of these, that are responses to and also have an impact on language education, such as the 2007 MLA report and the most recent revision of the ACTFL Standards. As such, these publications respond to larger, national and sometimes global events and trends, whether market forces or catastrophic events such as 9/11 or, as we may soon see, crises precipitated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***A Postmodern and Postcolonial Post-Secondary Language Education***

As an essentially social-constructivist theory, an ecological approach entails taking an ideological and political stance to language teaching and learning. This is because, as the Douglas Fir Group (2016), Kubota

and Miller (2017), Kumaravadivelu (2006), and others have noted, language teaching is always oriented toward or derived from particular ideologies about language, communication, learning, and education, and settings in which language learning happen are always in some way the site of struggle over conflicting power interests (Ortega, 2008, p. 218). Neoliberal ideology, which in large measure means the commodification of language (itself a contested term; see Block, 2019) and market-oriented thinking about both the objectives and the outcomes of teaching, has come to dominate language education (Block et al., 2012; Kramersch, 2019; Macedo, 2019), and is therefore a salient macro-level component of the complex system we describe (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Yet another macro-level node in the complex system of the language program or department is the ideological counterpressure that has emerged to confront what are viewed as the limiting and even damaging aspects of neoliberal ideologies on education overall (Spivak, 2013), and language education in particular. These postmodern and postcolonial critical treatments, especially of post-secondary language education in the United States, have taken on increased urgency in the era of Trump, during which the dismantling or undermining of language education within the humanities appears to be accelerating and voices of the previously voiceless are clamoring to be heard. Thus, although we should necessarily retain a critical stance to any ideology we follow, and indeed, as Kramersch (2019, p. 67) warns, be careful of not unintentionally engaging in “colonial practices” as we seek to foster change in the U.S. context in language education, mindful and principled pursuit of postmodern and postcolonial criticism can serve as a counterweight to the pressures of neoliberal ideologies throughout our institutions.

Whereas the roots of this ideology go back to the mid-twentieth century, in the field of applied linguistics it was Kramersch’s (1993) seminal work, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, that initiated this important strand of scholarship. Notable contributions include Reagan and Osborn (2002), Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2008), Byrnes (2006), Makoni and Pennycook (2006), Kramersch (2009), Blommaert (2010), García and Wei (2014), and more recently the Douglas Fir Group (2016), Gramling (2016), Canagarajah (2017, 2018), Levine (2020), and the contributions to the volumes edited by Macedo (2019) and Criser and Malakaj (2020). Though diverse in its specific areas of inquiry, central questions, and goals, this body of work shares a fundamentally ecological vision of language and language education in a globalized world (Canagarajah, 2017).

These works also urge professionals to recognize and then transcend the limitations of the modernist project, colonialism, and deep-seated societal inequities that continue to play out in our language curricula, programs, and institutions. As Ortega (2019) delineated, the ecology of language education—and, by implication, of language departments—is permeated with social ideologies, including “institutionalized and collective racism” that ultimately prioritizes the “elite multilinguals [who] often seek classroom instruction” (p. 28) and whose access to formalized language learning scenarios is far greater than that of other individuals and communities. The necessity of approaching any analysis of language education through a social justice lens, particularly in the United States context, is further championed by recent scholarship on decolonization of language education (Criser & Malakaj, 2020; Macedo, 2019). They proclaimed that “without centering diversity and attending to the needs of students structurally excluded from existing educational models any future curricular work is bound to fall short” (p. 12), and therefore called for an overall retooling from individual instructional units up through to recruitment and admissions strategies (Criser & Malakaj, 2020, p. 7; see also Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

In terms of an ecological approach, decolonizing the language program or department describes a goal and a process simultaneously. It provides a lens through which to identify and perhaps view in new ways the elements and agents in the system, in particular the curriculum and the students in our classrooms, resist and perhaps transform neoliberal institutional orientations that cast language education primarily as a marketable commodity, and challenge and transform existing power and institutional structures. As Criser and Malakaj (2020) explained, decolonization is about the impact of colonization, which reverberates into the very habitus of educational systems (see also Macedo, 2019): “current ideologies and practices of power, for example capitalism and globalization, as well as institutions which govern our daily lives, for example schools, universities, courts, are still very much rooted ‘in histories of colonialism’” (Criser & Malakaj, 2020, p. 4). Criser and Malakaj further argued that decolonization is closely associated with

theoretical models of postmodernism and postcolonialism in their critiques “intended to decenter and deconstruct the presumed superiority of Western culture as well as the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives inside and outside the academy” (p. 4). They joined Tuck and Yang (2012) in suggesting that the aims of decolonization will likely remain unfulfilled (p. 2). Yet in terms of the deeply ingrained limitations and failures of language education in the United States detailed by Reagan and Osborn (2019) and others (e.g., Bernhardt, 2018; Kramersch, 2009), a postcolonial approach as part of the very ecology of post-secondary language education can at the very least create affordances for decentering and deconstructing—and reconstructing or reconstituting, what the 2007 MLA Report envisions, namely “new structures for a changed world” (p. 234). In the final section of this article we detail implications for creating just such affordances.

### ***The Language Program and Department in Ecological Perspective***

Although we acknowledge numerous power dynamics at play in the structural organization of a department and/or program, an ecological approach allows for a focus on the activity and multidirectional relationships within it as a complex system, with the three nested levels discussed earlier operating simultaneously. This “multidimensional puzzle” (Levine et al., 2008, p. 244), as reflected in the curricular and departmental projects and initiatives we have already mentioned, sees the program and department not unlike a neural network, a system interconnected by nodes of activity and flows of energy, with all of the components—agents, elements, and processes—affecting and affected by all of the others in some way (Spivey, 2007; van Lier, 2004). If we consider the agents in the network in this way, hierarchies become a mere artifact of the discourses about those systems, not accurate representations of their reality. Those with less power or influence relative to others, and the interaction between the elements, are all equally legitimate, even if not equally influential (non-linear effects). As framed by the Douglas Fir Group (2016) with regard to the field of Second Language Acquisition, such an understanding of interrelationships allows departments to pose “the full range of relevant questions, from the neurobiological and cognitive micro levels to the macro levels of the sociocultural, educational, ideological and socioemotional” (p. 39).

A further aspect of this nodal system should be considered: It is continually changing with the different agents and elements in it co-adapting. This also means that the current state of any given element or set of elements has emerged from earlier ones and is connected not just to the present but to the past. In a human ecological system like a language program or department, the actions and changes occurring for one person are connected discursively and ineluctably to earlier ones. This aspect of human complex systems echoes Bourdieu’s (1977, 1991) notion of the habitus as a set of inculcated, structured, durable, generative, and transposable dispositions (see Thompson, 1991, p. 12).

The crucial question emerges as to how this nodal model of the language program or department can be used in the discourses of departments and institutions and affect the ways we pose and tackle crucial questions. We reiterate the observation made earlier that bifurcation is a symptom and not the cause of the problems and limitations of post-secondary language education; and that it is the current, hierarchical, steadfastly conservative framing of language departments that hinders us from asking and then addressing the sorts of questions that would help us to re-envision the program, its structures, and ways of both setting and achieving its goals, not least is transformation. As Randall (2020) reminds us in her proposal for a decolonized approach to foreign language (FL) curricula:

if it can be agreed that the aim and value of higher education in general and of the humanities in particular is to cultivate a humane citizenry and to foster habits of self-cultivation for the sake of all humanity, then humanities faculty must not shrink from, but rather double down on this mission, not just as a public good, but as good for the public. (p. 49)

We would add that, as always, the work of the language program or department is about contributing to the education of its students, and to the humanities, but in today’s world the imperative has intensified for all educational activity in post-secondary language departments to promote social justice within and beyond the department and institution.



Fortunately, we are now at a point that we can move away from enduring modernist understandings of language education (Kramsch, 2014), unyielding power hierarchies, and dehumanizing neoliberal pressures that frame language learning as a tool to be wielded to further one's career (Warner, 2018). To do so, we need only turn to the plentitude of scholarship that has implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, approached its object of inquiry, such as language pedagogy, program direction, graduate teacher education, and larger issues of departmental and institutional power dynamics, from a complexity and ecological perspective (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, 2012) and/or with postcolonial aims (Criser & Malakaj, Eds., 2020). The promise of undertaking these projects in one's own institutional context is that change will manifest in the micro- and meso-levels of the individual and department. It also creates opportunities for transformations in ideologies at the macro-level. In other words, in the projects and initiatives that have been published in AAUSC annual volumes, *ADFL Bulletin*, and *MLA Profession* pieces, as well as those frequently presented at regional and national conferences, we have an ample trove of material for micro-level, bottom-up change. For it to reach that critical mass needed as a tipping point, however, cognizance of, and direct links with, meso- and macro-level considerations are needed. Therefore, in our final section we turn to a range of implications and guidelines.

### **Implications of an Ecological Approach for Practice**

In line with the historical concern of the AAUSC volumes which we commemorate with this article, the focal point of our consideration in this final section remains on the language program and department, but it is important to remember that we are talking about clusters of elements (nodes) in the larger complex systems of the college, institution, and further social and spatial levels, including national ideologies and beliefs regarding language education. Throughout, it is about ways to reframe what we already do in terms of the ecology of the whole, and toward decolonizing the curriculum and the very structures scholars have complained about over decades.

Now, before proceeding it is worth asking a couple of elephant-in-the room questions: Why have programs and departments by and large resisted the sort of holistic approach implied by an ecological model? And why have many departments failed to implement on a large scale the sorts of reforms that might lead to greater success in fostering advanced capacities in learners (Byrnes et al., 2006; Byrnes & Maxim, 2004; Pfeiffer, 2008; Reagan & Osborn, 2019) and the promotion of social justice (Dubreil & Thorne, 2019; Osborn, 2006)? We do not believe that it is merely or generally elitism or entrenchment, though in some places this may be the case. Nor do we believe that it is due to grudging acquiescence to neoliberal norms that can devalue and insidiously chip away at the very viability of language departments (Boufoy-Bastick, 2015; Schwedhelm & King, 2020). Instead, we suggest that it is due to a disproportionate concern with the micro-level of activity, primarily with bottom-up change. This is due in part to responses to external budgetary or administrative limitations, and in part to a failure to see the interconnections we have detailed here between any given agent in the system and all the others, and to consider these interconnections in curricular and programmatic decision-making.

As we see it, three pressing questions remain: first, as Phipps and Levine (2012a) maintained, how can language professionals build upon the existing ecology of the department to scale up innovations by individual instructors and programs and make these the new normal? Second, what strategic initiatives would help departments to engage in the sort of reorganization, democratization, and decolonization emerging from an ecological approach, particularly if they have heretofore been unable or unwilling to do so? And finally, and perhaps most relevant for our readers, how would a possible model, including the curriculum, outreach activities, and by extension language advocacy implied by an ecological approach, manifest across a four-year undergraduate program? Three main implications emerge in answer to these questions: pedagogy, empowerment/enfranchisement, and collaboration.

#### **Pedagogy**

We know that neoliberal ideologies can and do exert a great deal of influence on language curriculum and

programming, sometimes even leading to program closures rather than reforms, but these forces can be challenged via new instructional paradigms. Therefore, the first principle of an ecological approach entails changing both what and the ways we teach, in part in order to promote and value diversity and multilingualism as a social good rather than a marketable skill-set. It also means thinking about and applying these ideas across all four years of the undergraduate curriculum. Each of these is predicated on the five features of complex dynamic systems outlined earlier (interconnectedness, non-linear change, co-adaptation, multiple timescales, and multiple spatial and social levels), as well as on a postmodern and postcolonial perspective of language education. The range of considerations and practices includes the following, though we are sure there are more, depending on the needs and priorities of particular departmental settings:

- Identify and articulate desired learning outcomes of the entire four-year curriculum, which should necessarily include study abroad for as many students as possible, and in ways that allow for the inherent variability of second-language learning. In practice this does not mean a different measure for each individual, but rather a fluid framing of, for instance, the ultimate goal of instruction for different groups of learners based on the needs and characteristics of the program or department. For some, the aim might be advanced academic capacities in a new language, and for others more quotidian control over form and meaning to engage with others.
- Formulate learning outcomes that also promote social justice through the learners' new languages, aligned with both the target culture(s) studied and the local context of instruction (Levine, 2020; Osborn, 2006; Glynn et al., 2014).
- Modify the timescales on which the curriculum manifests such that acquisition of forms and capacities for communication develop in better alignment with what applied linguists have learned of the inherent constraints and progression of acquisition. The upshot is that the focus is not on acquiring particular grammatical forms on a particular timeline, but rather that acquisition would extend over the entire four years. In terms of a genre- and usage-based approach, this also means moving from private to public discourses, and from more concrete to more abstract contexts of use toward developing advanced capacities in the new language (Byrnes & Sprang, 2004). Part of the work required in reconsidering timescales is determining specifically what constitutes advancedness in the learner's new language (Pfeiffer, 2008), which is work that can and should be done in collaboration among all members of the department (Byrnes, 2001).
- Disrupt monolithic and ethnocentric representations of the target culture by determining what sorts of historical, political, social, and artistic events, trends, or issues are valued by diverse and especially minority groups within the target culture(s) and integrating those into all levels of the curriculum (Layne, 2020; Macedo, 2019). Ensure, however, in the selection and didactization of these texts that students are engaging ethically with all embedded concepts and viewpoints "on their own terms" (Kramsch, 2019, p. 69).
- Expose students to, and have them directly engage with, multiple viewpoints of any particular subject matter studied, from the beginning of introductory language through the most advanced courses, so that they can co-construct their understandings of culture and language together with their instructors (Levine, 2020). This may entail integrating activities by which students explicitly examine the biases and implicit assumptions undergirding commercial textbooks and/or supplementing these works with instructional materials that provide a variety of perspectives on any one issue (Fabbian et al., 2021).
- Define the sociocultural orders of discourse, including sociolinguistic features such as register, that students need to be aware of, participate in, and critically examine (Kramsch, 2019; Tarnawska Senel, 2020; Randall, 2020). These discourses grant learners agency and choice and validate their multiple and complex cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and gender identities (Criser &

Malakaj, 2020; Glynn et al., 2014; Kramsch, 2009). Inclusion of these discourses gives value to non-standard varieties and multiple sociolinguistic domains of the learners' new language.

- Foster learners' multiple—including digital—literacies in and through new languages and what Reinhardt and Thorne (2019) call “multifarious repertoires” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Kern, 2000; Leander & Boldt, 2013; New London Group, 1996; Paesani et al., 2016).
- Create opportunities for critical, guided reflection across levels in order to deepen analysis of cultural products, practices, perspectives as well as linguistic constructs and discourse strategies (Crane, 2018; Murti, 2008). These critically analyzed products, practices, and perspectives may even extend to students' and the institution's own representations of language learning and/or community-based service-learning activities related to language learning (Palpacuer Lee & Hutchison Curtis, 2021).
- Integrate translanguaging pedagogies in principled and strategic ways thereby giving explicit value and purpose to the use of L1 and learners' other languages as part of language learning, in co-construction with students (García & Wei, 2014; Hemphill & Blakely, 2019; Levine, 2011a; Levine, 2020).

### ***Democratizing and Decolonizing the Program and Department***

In developing the ideas in this section, we considered the term empowerment but rejected it, in part because of its association with the very sorts of neoliberal ideologies we challenge, and also because of its vagueness and overall sloganization in educational (and other) discourses. Instead, we think of the sorts of activities that compel profound and meaningful consideration of all of the people in the complex system of the language program or department and arrive at the idea of democratizing and decolonizing the faculty, students, and others. By this we mean enfranchising in particular those who normally are perceived to be powerless or disenfranchised, or perhaps merely less visible. Just as we can affect change pedagogically through the ways we teach, so too can we demonstrate “leadership from behind” (Mandela, 1994) for those less empowered, by raising awareness of multidirectional relationships in our departments, altering the paths of individuals and groups in our complex dynamic system, and supporting these agents in making significant contributions across the department and the institution. There may of course be unintended outcomes, and we cannot predict the exact nature of change; but change will take place nonetheless which would accord with what we know of the current ecologies of institutions and a context-contingent vision of change. Specific steps or guidelines would include some or all of the following, and here, too, this is not an exhaustive list:

- Provide opportunities for all department members—which includes everyone from the tenure-line faculty to graduate students teaching in the department to the students in the introductory courses to the administrative staff—to reflect on the purposes and desired outcomes of the entire program. This can be in the form of surveys, interviews, retreats, or through committees made up of diverse members. Necessarily, it should take a deeply inclusive approach, such that all department members' multiple identities are given a voice.
- Enable the expertise of all department members to be integrated into the curriculum. In particular, the areas of interest and expertise of graduate students and non-tenure track faculty should be given a concrete place in the conceptualization of the full four-year undergraduate curriculum (Heitsch et al., 2013); likewise, the expertise and areas of interest of the senior faculty should be present and integrated from the very first semester of language (Byrnes, 2001; Maxim et al., 2013; Pfeiffer, 2008). This can happen through professional development initiatives and grants, or collaborative projects supported at the departmental or higher levels. It also means creating affordances for the students in our classes to help co-design the curriculum and even assessments in a range of ways (Lantolf & Poehner, 2010; Poehner, 2007; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005), bringing to bear their interests, priorities, and goals for language learning.

- Related to the previous, involve all department members in goal-setting and decision-making about curriculum and teaching practices.
- To enfranchise the students in our classes, reframe language learning itself in new ways. Warner (2018) has proposed a profound vision of language education for social justice, urging that language professionals orient teaching towards fostering multilingual beings and frame foreign language learning as gifting (based on Luke, 2008; as well as Bourdieu) to position students “as apprenticed members in international communities (rather than markets)” which in turn “prioritizes capacities that are left out in frameworks of language skills as commodity—for example, attentiveness, reciprocity, responsibility, and hospitality” (Warner, 2018, p. 114).
- Think beyond the walls of the classroom when designing curriculum and planning instruction. Digital media of all sorts as well as opportunities for real-world interaction within and beyond the institution should be integral to each course across the entire curriculum (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019).

### **Enhanced Collaboration**

Whereas the pedagogical and democratization and decolonization work outlined above takes place within the department, an ecological approach also implies collaboration with those interconnected nodes at levels beyond the department, such as with colleagues in other disciplines, local communities, and administrators. We call this enhanced collaboration. Enhanced collaboration allows us to further engage with macro-level ideologies and discourses that frame and/or inform the general public’s understanding and appreciation of language education. Because these discourses can manifest as reductionist and even damaging, even with the best of intentions, as Warner (2011) outlines, in an ecological model we should take on advocacy and

broadcast [ourselves] as experts in the linguistic and cultural practices mapped out by the nationally, geographically, and linguistically oriented monikers that identify them, ...[and] also affirm that [we] are uniquely situated to attune students to ‘the multivoiced and dialogized discourse that characterizes the production and distribution of knowledge in the globalized information society’ (Hansen, 2004, p. 124). ( p. 7)

Indeed, with much of the discourse promoting language education framed as an add on, departments can make a concerted effort to reframe the mainstream narrative concerning the value of language education, not as a tool to wield (Warner, 2018; Bilbao Terreros & Bono, 2021), but as a means to “cultivate empathy, heighten attentiveness to the biosphere, and augment commitment to civic engagement” (Dubreil & Thorne, 2019, p. 1). The types of enhanced collaboration that would fall under an ecological approach include:

- Collaboratively design and teach cross-departmental and/or multidisciplinary seminars that explore issues of language policy, language ideologies, histories of language education, language and power, etc. Such courses would provide students the theoretical and symbolic competence to enrich their language learning endeavors while engaging them in discussions with students studying other languages and cultures (Kramsch, 2006; see also Warner, 2011, p. 14–15).
- Educate colleagues in other departments (from art history to engineering) and administrators about language education and its intended outcomes today (i.e., it is no longer about rote memorization or grammar drills, or a focus on mere transactional communication).
- Open dialogue with colleagues from other disciplines around shared values and educational principles, particularly in regard to global or democratic citizenship (Byram, 2008) to help make languages a normal and expected element of higher education, not as add-ons primarily for utilitarian purposes, but through shifts in networking with others in the institution.
- Engage students and colleagues in social outreach activities to enrich connections between the department and multilingual people beyond it, promote social justice in action, and provide learners opportunities for real-world communication that holds significance for all involved (see

Bocci, 2002; Miñana, 2016; Ruggerio, 2019). Develop as faculty, and potentially integrate into coursework for students' development, a critical stance towards how community engagement is discussed, portrayed, and promoted across media forms and in other forms of formal and informal communications (Palpacuer Lee & Hutchison Curtis, 2021).

## **Conclusion: Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy 2.0?**

The ecological model we have presented here can help shift the wider discourse about language education toward the sort of reorientation that was envisioned in *Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy* (Levine & Phipps, Eds., 2012), and which Warner (2018) unequivocally calls for: fundamental departmental and programmatic identity work to address the needs of 21st century language/culture learners. As Warner (2018) observes, although language professionals appear to be working in an increasingly hostile political and administrative environment for language education overall in the United States, with the MLA reporting a record number of program closures in recent years (Looney & Lusin, 2018), language education in the United States has been discussed as being in a state of crisis for a long time (Levine, 2011b). Ironically, given these trends, departments and programs often have responded in ways that appear to affirm this discourse, as Warner maintains, by “optimiz[ing] their curricula ... because they are tethered to preordained interests and value sets—perceived immediate threats to national security, an imagined corporate world within which students will need to compete” with the aim of providing “access to the language and culture resources students will need in the most cost-effective and efficient way possible—or risk downsizing and closure” (p. 111). In trying to address the issues raised by perceptions of efficacy/inefficacy or efficiency/inefficiency, the profession in essence validates and reifies those ideologies, a situation that would likely keep language education in perpetual crisis mode.

This ostensible gordian knot, we suggest, can begin to be unraveled through the ecological model we propose here. Actions taken that begin by framing the language program and department as a complex dynamic system hold the potential to emanate outward to other spheres, including first and foremost the institution in which the department works. Through apprehending the language program and department in this way, we can begin to realize a critical mass of change required to alter, and hopefully positively shape, the work of language professionals and their students, so that it might also come to be perceived and valued in new ways.

Of course, as we undergo these changes, we should also take into account that core aspects of our ecologies are rapidly altering in response to numerous factors, and these deserve increased attention in order to account for them within the complex dynamic system. For one, we are living in an ever faster-changing, complex globalized world of flows and increasing global cosmopolitanism (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014; Papastephanou, 2005) and therefore language professionals are engaging with a student body coming with ever more complex multiliteracies, multilingualisms, and with diverse ways of engaging with others around the world. Therefore, theory-to-practice models that help orient language education in coming years need to meet these challenges of diversity, translingual practices, and inclusivity as never before (Komska et al., 2019). Additionally, and perhaps of more immediate concern, increasingly blurred lines between digital and non-digital communication, as more language programs move into the digital sphere, represents a shift that is not trivial in its implications for language programs and require new thinking about curricular hybridity (Rubio & Thoms, 2014) and programmatic equity, so as to avoid either further bifurcation between lower-level and upper-level courses, or, as is perhaps already the case, crass divisions between on-campus and remote faculty, most of whom are not in the tenure stream. With regard to the recent large-scale shift of language teaching to remote and online formats due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it remains to be seen whether new norms emerge that further blur the lines between the digital and non-digital worlds. These many changes in location, setting, and modalities of instruction/interaction hold significant implications for the learning experiences of students, the scope and nature of work of LPDs, teacher education of graduate students, the nature of involvement of contingent faculty (especially when these are increasingly not even present physically on campus, and overall departmental culture), and even the

discourse surrounding language education.

This case for an ecological approach to language pedagogy, programs, and departments emerged from ideas and analyses of the 2010 AAUSC volume by Levine and Phipps. The main goal of that volume was to offer solutions to real-world issues of relevance to language programs that take innovations in bridging theory and practice as their starting point or their motivation. In her contribution to that volume, Arens takes the “theory project” of the twentieth century to task, in the humanities at large but particularly as relates to its role—or lack of it—in teaching university students new languages. She writes that “we have seen an enormous number of new theories about the ideological content of literature and its impacts on readers, with a particular focus on identity politics. Yet these innovations do not have correlated models for pedagogy or classroom practice” (Arens, 2012, p. 218). We believe that the ecological approach proposed here, which some scholars have called a meta- or supra-theory that helps a range of postmodern and postcolonial models align with one another, offers a useful framework for future action and transformation in pedagogy, language programs, and departments.

## Notes

1. “Agents” is the word used most often in scholarship on complexity theory for the people in the system, a term we prefer to stake-holders.

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