

Organic Language Teachers in Organic Settings: From Ecology to Methodology

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Abstract—The purpose of this article is to introduce ‘Organic Language Teachers in Organic Settings’ and ‘organic language teaching’ which are in this sense new terms introduced by the author in the field of language learning and teaching. The general ideas of the word ‘organic’ are touched upon in agriculture, and from that ‘organic language teaching’, ‘organic settings’, and ‘organic language teachers’ are developed and introduced. Characteristics and features of organic language teachers are also presented.

Index Terms—organic language teaching, organic language teachers, organic settings, organic agriculture, green consumerism

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we hear the word ‘organic’ more frequently in combinations, such as ‘organic agriculture’, ‘organic food’, and ‘organic products’. The general understanding of this word is when farmers cultivate the lands or farms “without using artificial fertilizer and pesticides” (van Elsen, 2000, p. 103). Besides, “organic agriculture tries to produce healthy food under environmentally sound conditions” (van Elsen, 2000, p. 101).

Increasing in production and consumption of organic food is among the main concerns in market trends of our time. Advocates of organic agriculture believe in some advantages of this kind of farming and cultivating. They “claim that it will help preserve the environment, improve people’s health, and create better conditions for agricultural workers” (Allen & Kovach, 2000, p.221).

Green Consumerism and Organic Food

Green consumerism is an approach which believes when consumers become more informed and shop more responsibly, they can transform the way in which goods are produced. Since the 1980s, this approach has been a crucial feature in the culture of environmentalism. A paradigmatic case for green consumerism is the market for organic food. (Allen & Kovach, 2000)

The National Organic Standards Board (1995, cited in Allen & Kovach, 2000) defines organic practices as follows:

Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony. (National Organic Standards Board, 1995, cited in Allen & Kovach, 2000, p. 222)

One of the fastest-growing segments of the food industry is organic products. This kind of industry from almost early stages of it, clearly understood that it is important to provide the consumer with information especially in the form of accurate and reliable labels. (Allen & Kovach, 2000)

Kane (1999, cited in Allen & Kovach, 2000) asserts that one of the earliest and the most successful eco-labels is the organic label. In 1970s, California and Oregon passed laws regulating organic labeling. Since then, the success of the organic label has led independent groups to use the organic label as a model for their own eco-labels.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

As Adcroft and Lockwood (2010) find out the “definitions of organic are diverse and lacking in universal acceptance and there are few, if any, operating concepts” (p. 7). They claim that this fact is “the biggest weakness and the biggest strength” (p. 7). Therefore, there would be a limited theoretical and empirical base in order to build new research and action, and it would allow academically and practically for a degree of risk taking and experimentation which more fully developed theories and concepts might not allow. Hence, it is beneficial to choose a perspective or as they put it “some kind of anchor for the discussion of an unfocused literature”. They concentrate on organic approaches regarding strategy, structure and innovation.

Casey (2008) in his blog emphasizes that recently the trend in digital media design has been toward extending the natural reach of human capacities. He argues that education system, just like modern farming, has been over-engineered, and over-relied on fostering narrow skills. So, there are obsessions with measurement, ongoing intervention in learning, confines in the site of learning to the classroom and attempts to make people homogeneous in their thinking which all result in the end to economic and social perils. Therefore, he asserts that just like farming there is a need for a new approach and he calls it a kind of organic movement in learning and teaching.

According to what Casey (2008) mentions, learning should be considered as a natural process in which people are curious and have a desire to be competent and connected in society. He emphasizes the inquiry cycle of ask, investigate, create, communicate and reflect, and providing children with the tools that help them learn the world through inquiry. He points out that well designed digital technologies afford connection, engagement, expression, creativity and learning, and they facilitate these transparently -without the need for complex prerequisite skills. In this case as he claims, children have access tools that boost their natural capacities to communicate, participate and make meaning of the world.

As it is clear, he focuses on digital media in order to prepare a natural setting which he considers organic. However, the perspective of the author of this article is different from his point of view. She considers organic teaching based on the aforementioned definitions of the word 'organic' in agriculture as a kind of teaching in which there is no adding material, and based on green consumerism, learners or teachers are provided with to the point information.

Moore (1988) points out that "an organic philosophy calls forth an organic approach to teaching" (p. 248), and teaching organically definitely would need more than one educational methodology, simply to draw from the fullness of human inventiveness. She concentrates on one particular form of organic teaching that is unusually full in itself which is called narrative teaching. This kind of teaching, deals with images of storytelling, simulation gaming, dramatization and ritual reenactments, yet she claims that it is more than a set of techniques that can be thrown into an eclectic bag of tricks. Narrative is a significant mode of human communication. It is a bearer of culture, and a potentially profound and far-reaching educational methodology. And in this sense, organic teaching is not the way the author of this article develops it.

Rutherford (1987, cited in van Lier, 2001) outlines the development of grammatical complexity in the organic sense. Van Lier (2001) asserts that only through an organic or ecological approach "the true role of interaction in learning and the true sense of what Vygotsky meant by the zone of proximal development can be revealed" (p. 102). Therefore, he continues that in this approach contingency and symmetry are central and overt acts of repairing are epiphenomenal.

Nunan (2001) argues that in the grammar class, one needs to go beyond linear approaches and traditional form-focused methodological practice. And he makes a case for "a more organic approach to grammar teaching" (p. 198). So, there should be a proper balance between exercises and tasks.

Nunan (2004) points out that organic view of acquisition is when "numerous items are acquired simultaneously, albeit imperfectly" (p.30). For the term organic, Nunan (2001) seems to have a linguistic perspective that holds a product-oriented point of view in which he focuses on learning. "The organic metaphor sees second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall" (p. 192). Based on this view learners learn many things at the same time, and imperfectly not one thing at the time and perfectly. Hence, "linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time" (Nunan, 2001. p.192). In this article the emphasis is on language teaching which is not dealt with in Nunan's definition.

Gibson and Pick (2000) put that the animal in its environment is the unit of study in the ecological approach and it is regarded as an interactive system. Within this system, the relations are reciprocal and "the reciprocity including a species evolving in an environment to which it becomes adapted, and an individual acting in its own niche, developing and learning" (Gibson & Pick, 2000, p. 14). Gibson (1979, cited in Gibson & Pick, 2000) believes that the ecological approach to perception has three concepts: affordance, information, and information pickup. In this sense, ecological approach is not presented as the way the researcher in this study introduced ecological or organic approaches.

Morrison and Hugh (2005) deals with the interview in which Osborn Hugh talks of his presentation at the 2005 World Future Society conference in Chicago. He and his partner, Margaret Gayle define three organization levels of their education system: "(1) the student-teacher interface in the classroom, (2) the district level where local budget and policy decisions are made, and (3) the state/national level where politicians define diktats that lead to red tape" (p. 1). They introduce organic education as a "bottom-up scenario in which organic forces replace existing mechanistic approaches at all three levels" (p. 1).

They believe that this kind of education acts as an instrument to *force* transformation of the American education system and is not simply another monograph that *advocates* change. According to what the author of this article understands from Morrison and Osborn (2005), it nearly seems that the organic education is dealt with in local settings or education of America and not globally. And almost it is not developed in a way that this article deals with the concept of organic teaching.

III. FROM NATURAL AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS TO 'ORGANIC' SETTINGS

There are different ways of agriculture. One classification is the distinction between organic and conventional agriculture. And their main difference is the way the farmer takes care of the fields and the crops. In the field of language teaching and learning also there are different classifications. Natural and educational, according to Ellis (1994, 2008), are two distinct settings for language learners. In the former formal learning occurs and in the latter there is conscious attention to rules and principles. In natural settings "learning is considered to result from direct participation and observation without any articulation of the underlying principles or rules" (Ellis, 2008, p. 288). Moreover, the focus is on the social significance of what is being learnt rather than on the mastery of subject matter. While in educational

settings the reverse is true. More emphasis is on the “mastery of ‘subject matter’ treated as a decontextualized body of knowledge” (Ellis, 2008, p. 288).

‘Organic Setting’ is a mixture of natural and educational settings, but more inclined to natural settings. It means learning is regarded as a result of direct participation and observation with possible natural articulation of the related rules, and it is formal or informal based on the social context and the course. Besides, social aspects are important as well as subject matters. And the subject matter is developed based on careful needs assessments.

One of the ideas or rules in food industry especially organic products as mentioned earlier according to Allen and Kovach (2000) is to provide the consumer with information in the form of accurate and reliable labels. From this idea, we can have language settings in which the teacher provides the learners with information especially accurate and to the point hints regarding the social context, materials and the course, then the result will be ‘organic language products’ or better say ‘organic language teaching’.

IV. ORGANIC LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Throughout the literature there are different terms to introduce or represent language teachers. These terms elaborate and label different teachers differently, such as ‘good English language teachers’ (Allen, 1980, cited in Brown, 2007), ‘successful language teacher’ (Pennington, 1990, cited in Brown, 2007), ‘professional English teachers’ (Ur, 2002), and ‘good-enough teachers’ (Allen, 2002). The researcher believes that we need another terminology for language teachers and it is ‘organic language teachers’. She thinks that rules and characteristics of ‘organic agriculture’ can be applied in teaching and regarded as basics for teachers.

V. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND ORGANIC LANGUAGE TEACHING

Environmental issues are the major concern of those who are the proponents of organic production. “Organic production means fewer or no synthetic agrochemicals, cleaner waters supplies, better soils” (IFOAM, 2007, cited in Risku-Norja & Mikkola, 2009, p. 731). Still organic agriculture like conventional agriculture relies on machinery which renders the production far from independent from fossil fuels. These days one of the key factors of organic production is social issues. So, organic agriculture is presented as ideal in terms of human and economic relations. (Risku-Norja & Mikkola, 2009)

It seems that in organic agriculture, environment and its issues are important and as Risku-Norja and Mikkola (2009) claim, social issues and concerns are one of the key elements of this kind of production. In language teaching, environment can affect language teachers and learners. Therefore, environment and social factors can change a conventional language teacher to an organic one. In organic agriculture, plants or crops or in general we can say products are cultivated without any adding materials so they grow naturally. Most of us have the experience of teaching everyday stuffs to our children, friends, neighbors, or relatives, and they grasp and learn them very well. In this case, the environment or social context is natural. There is no social context such as institute, university, classroom, but simply we are there with our addressee.

Ellis (2008) points out that according to a structural point of view “social factors such as power and prestige are seen as determining social context” (p.979), and in terms of interactional point of view “the social context is seen as created in each situation through an interplay of social factors” (p.979). Situational factors, according to Ellis (2008) deal with “the specific characteristics of a social context that impact on L2 learning” (p.324). This situational factors not only affect L2 learning, but also L2 teaching. Hence, teachers are under the influence of such kind of factors.

From the characteristics of organic production, the researcher comes up with the definition of organic language teaching as a kind of teaching in which:

- a. There are fewer or no synthetic relations among the teacher and the learners (no connections, priorities, exceptions)
- b. There is a peaceful and unstressful ambience (pass or fail in the exam, expelling from the class, no fear of asking related and useful questions)
- c. There are better equipments (up to date classrooms, using smart boards, projectors, the internet)
- d. Attitudes are natural yet polite and respectful (because nearly everything is on its place, there is no need to act and attitudes are naturally accepted)
- e. There are culturally-awakened materials for teaching (learners and teachers are being respected by having culturally related books, articles, etc.)
- f. Needs analysis is in the form of assessment and it is both offline and online (there is an ongoing needs analysis, or better say, needs assessment)
- g. There is less or no intruders in the case of authorities, supervisors, etc. (teachers can be creative and noble within the outline of the course, and they feel free to have their own idiosyncrasy)

When the teaching approach is organic, then we will have organic language teachers, organic language learners, organic language classrooms, organic materials, and even organic assessment. One may wonder that ‘organic’ is exactly synonymous with ‘natural’. However, the researcher emphasizes that ‘organic’ is more than being natural, and it is an umbrella term for the concept of ‘natural’.

VI. ORGANIC LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN ORGANIC LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Organic language teachers are those who teach organically. They follow and respect the aforementioned characteristics of organic language teaching. They are educated language teachers. The researcher believes that the following features represent organic language teachers:

- a. They have enough authority to teach the related materials and concepts of the course with their own way of teaching which is based on their individualization, idiosyncrasy, experience and intuition.
- b. They are not under any spy or pressure of the authorities of their workplace, such as university's authorities or institute's supervisor or manager. Therefore, they can teach with peace of mind.
- c. They are not spooned or brain-washed to transfer any fixed or pre-fabricated rules or regulations or mottos which are not related to the course.
- d. They can have some more space to follow the hidden curriculum and guide the learners whenever they feel they need to know more than the materials. So they can provide the learners with accurate and to the point information.
- e. They teach in the organic language classrooms in which they have all the updated facilities of learning and teaching plus relaxed and healthy atmosphere.
- f. They should not have exceptions in their attitude towards the learners. There are ideally no connections, exceptions, or recommended learners. The eye-contact, affection, softness and hardness are identical to all the learners.
- g. They are mentally relaxed, due to receiving enough and satisfying salary. Financially speaking, they are not under pressure.
- h. They have some days off to deal with their individual matters. To put it in a better way, they have holidays, and they have the opportunity to enjoy them without thinking about their job.
- i. They will have bonuses in the form of travel-tickets, coupons of buying books or magazines, days off, and so on.
- j. They can have cooperation with their colleagues to do researches.
- k. They will be present in developing the curriculums and courses of the university or institute. They have the right to have their own words.

These are the main features of organic language teachers, and the list can go on considering local factors of the teachers and the settings.

VII. HUMANISTIC LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ORGANIC LANGUAGE TEACHING

In agriculture, these days the use of whole grains is commonly advised. And, whole-grain products are really useful and healthy such as whole wheat flour, whole wheat bread and whole wheat pasta. In language teaching, the whole language and holistic education are important.

Organic language teaching is a humanistic approach. It pays attention to teachers' feelings and ideas. In this kind of Stevick (1990, cited in Nagaraj, 1996) presents most important characteristics of humanism as 'feelings', 'social relations', 'intellect', and 'self-actualization'. Moskowitz (1978, cited in Stevick, 1990) emphasizes on two major aspects of humanistic education. The first emphasis is on feelings and believes that "learning is affected by how students feel about themselves" (p. 25), and it deals with "educating the whole person" (p. 25). The second one is "on bringing out the uniqueness of each individual" and "to be self-actualizing is to function to one's full capacity" (p.25). Therefore, individualization, idiosyncrasy, and affection are emphasized in humanistic approaches to language learning and teaching. Organic teachers are allowed to have their own idiosyncrasy in teaching. They are not forced to follow others, so they can have their own words in order to individualize their teaching.

Terrell (1982, cited in Stevick, 1990) pinpoints those activities which are affective-humanistic "explore the students' values, ideas, opinions, goals, feelings as well as their experiences" (p.26). In developing organic materials, feelings and goals of the learners are carefully considered along with their culture. Learners' and teachers' ideas, opinions and values are regarded and collected in curriculum development through online and offline needs assessments.

VIII. CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY AND ORGANIC LANGUAGE LEARNING/TEACHING

The theory underlying organic language teaching and learning is constructivist learning theory. In constructivist learning theory, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001) knowledge is socially constructed and it is not received or discovered. In such context, constructivist learners "create meaning", "learn by doing", and work collaboratively "in mixed groups on common projects". On the other hand, teachers collaborate with the learners in order to "create knowledge and understanding in their mutual social context" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 109). Teachers are not seeking to cover the curriculum, yet they believe learning should focus on the "learners' experience, needs, interests, and aspirations" (p. 110).

Final Remarks

Nowadays the borders among different fields of science and art are not clear. Every day we see more interdisciplinary fields and majors which help one another to develop and grow. Therefore, it is not farfetched if we borrow the term 'organic' from ecology and agriculture in order to customize it in the field of language teaching and learning.

Organic language teaching happens in organic settings with the help of organic language teachers who teach and guide organic language learners to develop and learn the language. Organic, in this way, is more than the term 'natural'. This new perspective is based on constructivist learning theory and humanistic language teaching. The researcher hopes that this terminology opens a new horizon in the field of language teaching and learning. It should be noted that there are yet more terms to deal with in this area and the researcher will try to underscore them in her future articles.

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