# Exploring Ecocomposition in Latin America in the context of English Education

*Explorando la ecocomposición en América Latina en el contexto de la enseñanza del inglés*

**Andrew Lee SIGERSON**
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3857-7214
andrew.sigerson@uach.cl
*Universidad Austral de Chile, Valdivia, Chile*

## ABSTRACT

The use of authentic materials is a fundamental factor in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). However, the question of the appropriateness of a given material is a complex question related to, among other factors, its relevance to the students. Thomas (2014) suggests utilizing "locally relevant authentic materials," an idea which, in the context of composition specifically, corresponds to a recent branch of composition studies in North America known as ecocomposition, which calls for a pedagogical approach centered on students' realities and local environments. This article explores its potential importance for TESOL in Latin America and is situated in the contemporary context of English as a language intertwined with the forces of globalization.

**Keywords:** Composition, ecology, ecocomposition, English, TESOL

## RESUMEN

El uso de materiales auténticos es un factor esencial en la enseñanza del inglés para hablantes de otras lenguas (TESOL). Sin embargo, la pertinencia de un material dado es un tema complejo relacionado, entre otros factores, con su relevancia para los estudiantes. Thomas (2014) sugiere utilizar "materiales auténticos de relevancia local", una idea que, en el contexto específico de la redacción, correspondería a una rama reciente de la enseñanza de la escritura en norteamérica que se llama *ecocomposition*, la cual exige un enfoque pedagógico centrado en la realidad de los estudiantes y sus ambientes locales. Este artículo explora su potencial importancia para TESOL en América Latina y el estudio del inglés en el contexto contemporáneo en tanto lengua entrelazada con las fuerzas de la globalización.

**Palabras clave:** Composición, ecología, ecocomposition, inglés, TESOL.

## INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language (EFL) is among the most commonly encountered forms of foreign language learning worldwide; however, its prevalence in Latin America and other regions is related to the often-questionable legacies of the spread and current prominence of the English language (Motha: 2014), which in many cases can be easily traced to histories of domination whose residues are still visible today to varying degrees (Brown: 2015). English is also linked to globalization and by extension to questionable neoliberal economic models which, paradoxically, may produce educational contexts that affect students' ability to learn the language in a useful and efficacious manner (Yilorm & Acosta: 2016). A possible response to this issue is to encourage a greater focus on students' local context in the EFL classroom, and indeed, in the case of the complex situation of EFL in Chile, Yilorm and Acosta (2016) state that in addition to other key issues contributing to a degraded and segregated educational space, "the environment in the [English] classroom tends to be unattractive since students' social and cultural realities are not considered" (p. 133). The idea that English programs and individual teachers could make a greater effort to focus on locally relevant materials and themes—aside from being pedagogically promising due to the potential for increased learner engagement, innovative lesson planning, and authentic target language input and production (Thomas: 2014)—counters the historical and modern trends of domination of peoples, communities, and their environments with which the English language remains associated (Motha: 2014). It counters both historical and present trends, in other words, that would paradoxically not be viewed as ethically compatible with modern social values in any Anglophone context, despite these trends having a direct, if temporally or spatially removed, connection with the current ubiquity of the English language worldwide.

In today's EFL classrooms, authentic materials (Hwang: 2005), including locally relevant authentic materials[1], can include not only input from English-speaking cultures but also student production—that is, student composition in the target language carried out for authentic communicative purposes. This increased association of authentic materials with students' own production, in addition to the input they receive, is largely facilitated by the World Wide Web, which is often defined as Web 2.0 nowadays to refer to the presence of interactive applications with user-generated content that are not only altering key aspects of modern culture and communication, but also happen to be effective tools for language learning (Stanley, 2013; Langer de Ramirez, 2012). This means that EFL composition no longer simply applies to writing but also to speaking (e.g., creating podcasts), presenting (e.g., creating videos and narrated slideshows), and interacting (e.g., social networking). Most English-teaching institutions with a functioning internet connection can now, in theory, incorporate the creation of students own authentic target language materials into curricular goals (Stanley, 2013); this can even involve having students use their own devices where possible, namely smartphones, which have been the device most associated with the shrinking of the digital divide (Egbert & Yang, 2004) in the developing world (Hockly, 2013; Hockly & Dudeney: 2014). Rather than simply representing one of the "four skills" (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), in other words, writing or *composition* in a growing number of language-learning contexts is now closer in meaning, though not synonymous, with the wider category of *production* of language.

Paired with a greater focus on learners' local environments, this expanded range of composition has great potential, and in particular, the field of ecocomposition, which has developed primarily in the context of the North American college composition classroom, has something to offer to EFL education in Latin America: it is an approach that joins the flourishing realm of composition to students' own environments. In this paper, the work of three key scholars of ecocomposition will be explored from the broad perspective of teaching English as a foreign language in Latin America.

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[1] Target language materials made by and for speakers of that language but which deal with themes that are relevant to the cultural context—whether local, regional, or national—of the EFL classroom (Thomas 2014).

Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana; ISSN 1316-5216; ISSN-e 2477-9555
Año 25, n° extra 9, 2020, pp. 249-263
251

In their essay "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition" (2002), Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser define ecocomposition as follows:

> Ecocomposition is the study of the relationships between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking). Ecocomposition draws from disciplines that study discourse … and merges their perspectives with work in disciplines that examine environment … As a result, ecocomposition attempts to provide a holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment (p. 266).

Though a broad and somewhat theoretical definition (it is important to bear in mind that ecocomposition was developed largely to be utilized for practical interventions in the teaching of writing), this conception of ecocomposition points to why the field is relevant to EFL in light of the issues described above: a concern for the relationship between environment (which refers not to just natural environment but to any environment, including the local community) and discourse (which here refers to any form of modern composition that students might engage in). Meanwhile, in Dobrin's essay "Writing Takes Place" (2001), he describes ecocomposition based on the definition of ecology itself as a field of study:

> Ecocomposition, to paraphrase [Haeckel's definition of ecology] … is the investigation of the total relations of discourse both to its organic and inorganic environment and to the study of all of the complex interrelationships between the human activity of writing and all of the conditions of the struggle for existence (p. 13).

This definition, relying on an explicit reference to the field of ecology (which includes human ecology [Marten: 2010]), makes the relevance of ecocomposition to EFL even clearer: in many EFL classrooms, students do see their entrance into the English-speaking world and the success of their discourse there (or lack thereof) as a personal challenge relating to their own struggle for a comfortable existence. However, beyond the level of the individual, what the entrance into the English-speaking world means for communities and local cultures, and how these smaller spheres are represented in that wider world, are important and often sensitive topics. It begins to make sense that a general call for focusing on students' local environments, especially in areas of the world that have been more subject than others to oppressive economic, cultural, and environmental practices associated with globalization and its predecessors (Yilorm & Acosta: 2016, Motha: 2014), might benefit from what ecocomposition has to offer theoretically and pedagogically. It is also important to bear in mind that while ecocomposition leaves ample room for bringing environmental themes into the classroom, which may have pedagogical benefits of its own (Setyowati & Widiati: 2014, Hauschild *et al*.: 2012), it is an approach that embraces students' own place first and foremost, addressing what matters to them in life as individuals as well as communities in their "struggle for existence."

Focusing on practical, pedagogical applications of ecocomposition, Entisar Elsherif offers the perspective of an EFL educator working in this emerging field outside of its principal context of North America. Her essay "Raising Awareness: Introducing Ecocomposition into an EFL Writing Classroom" (2013) represents one of very few examples of scholarship directly addressing the connection between ecocomposition and EFL; accordingly, she situates her work amongst innovative EFL teaching approaches, referencing the origins of ecocomposition in the US university system:

> First-year composition teachers [in US universities] are now playing a great role in raising awareness. EFL teachers can play the same role by broadening their writing courses' requirements to include not only advancing students' written fluency but also their relationships with place and environmental issues. They should engage students in global and local matters that are going on outside the classroom by bringing them into the class through relevant readings, discussions, and writing (p. 79).

Elsherif's call for ecocomposition draws attention to the approach's significant ability to not only aid concrete pedagogical goals related to EFL composition, but also to draw attention to both local and global matters through the locus of students' place, which has direct implications for student engagement as well as critical pedagogical concerns. Considering the expanded role of composition in many EFL settings, which is closely related to modern digital technology (Walker & White: 2013), the promotion of an ecocomposition-inspired approach need not apply only to EFL writing courses: it can apply to EFL courses in general.

Elsherif further illustrates the advantageous local focus of ecocomposition when discussing course materials. For instructors utilizing ecocomposition-inspired approaches in place of or in addition to other, more conventional methodologies, a significant proportion of materials "would be from the EFL learners' environment itself. Teachers could look for readings related to the topics being dealt with in class … to help EFL writers learn how to discuss such topics and contribute to the process of raising environmental consciousness" (p. 86). This suggestion implies the use of locally relevant authentic materials (Thomas: 2014), which is an emerging concept in EFL that embodies pedagogical and technological innovation and critical pedagogical concerns influencing the field today.

Drawing from key scholars working in ecocomposition; the pedagogical application of ecocomposition in EFL as described by Elsherif; and Thomas' concept of locally relevant authentic materials in language teaching, this essay aims to explore the implications of adapting ecocomposition and a greater focus on "the local" to Latin American EFL education. It bears mention that the direct educational benefits of addressing locally relevant topics and environmental themes—which are often highly engaging to EFL students and suitable for a wide variety of activities and projects (Brown: 2015, Setyowati & Widiati: 2014, Hauschild *et al.*: 2012)—can be justified on concrete pedagogical grounds alone. Concerns related to critical pedagogy are warranted and highly relevant in terms of the context being discussed and the place of English education in Latin America, offering clarity and helpful perspectives on students' and teachers' choices and experiences; but it is likewise important to point out that bringing ecocomposition to contexts outside of North America is justifiable on its own as well, viewing it as a vehicle to enhance various elements of EFL pedagogy that relate to goals inside the classroom (such as motivation, interaction, and exposure to authentic target language materials) as much as outside.

In any case, a proper starting point in examining ecocomposition is the present need for increased environmental awareness, which in turn is related to many key social issues, at both local and global scales; a genuine appreciation and concern for the world around us typically begins at the former. It is important to establish at this point that an explicit focus on the local environment can naturally produce, or at least increase the likelihood of, a positive increase in awareness and concern without necessarily involving the direct treatment of associated political themes. I will address this topic within the larger realm of critical pedagogy because as an EFL instructor who is utilizing the principles of ecocomposition in my own teaching approach, I feel that it is important and instructive to do so—but again, I do so in recognition of the fact that the basic pedagogical argument for ecocomposition entering the EFL classroom alone justifies the practice. This basic pedagogical argument would be related to immediate, language-related learning objectives (Elsherif: 2013) and align with new paradigms for EFL student engagement and communication involving themes and materials relevant to students (Thomas: 2014) and in the context of new media composition (Stanley: 2013, Langer de Ramirez: 2012).

Furthermore, incorporating ecocomposition need not even, necessarily, imply an explicit effort to raise awareness of environmental issues among students; nor does it necessitate overt activism of any kind, though it certainly could be associated with activism. Such objectives are surely appropriate in certain cases, but they are not a necessary prerequisite for generating the more general outcome of raising awareness of the value of students' place in the context of a globalized world—the value of the local, of what matters in students' lives now, and of what they may *discover* to matter in their lives against the backdrop of a foreign language that is nearly always, to some degree, an imposition. This awareness-raising can naturally lead to heightened concern over the hazards the local community and environment may be facing, even in cases when it is not possible or

convenient to broach such topics directly in class. The possibility of an ostensibly neutral approach will be important in certain EFL teaching contexts in which such a stance, or lack thereof, is either necessary or deemed preferable by teachers themselves based on knowledge of their classes, institutions, or regional contexts.

I will explore this topic in conversation with three key thinkers from the field of ecocomposition and in recognition of several relevant themes (as outlined previously) within the realm of critical pedagogy as defined by Paulo Freire (1996) and those who followed, including ecocomposition scholars themselves.

## COMPOSING THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

In recounting his own ecocomposition efforts at Keene State College in New Hampshire, USA, Mark Long (2001) draws attention to the concept of tying academic literacy to cultural literacy: "The correlation between academic and cultural literacy is inspired by the democratic ideal of an informed and involved citizenry" (p. 131). This is a very familiar idea; however, in recent decades, there has been a clear shift—or perhaps more accurately, a persistent questioning—of what such literacy should include and what an informed and involved citizenry should be concerned with. According to Long, "for an increasing number of college and university teachers, the common problem in need of constructive address is the impact of human culture on the physical environment. In the humanities in particular, educators have therefore sought to shift emphasis from cultural to environmental literacy" (p. 131). Citing David Orr (1992), whose work focuses on the need for widespread ecological literacy, Long points out that despite this shift in thinking, the same basic challenge that has always accompanied critical pedagogy in general remains: change cannot happen if education continues in the same fashion that gave rise to (or at least failed to prevent) the problems at hand. An educational shift in line with these changing ideas of literacy would inevitably involve a greater focus on place, at any level, and it could involve a focus on the local in order to give students a meaningful starting point in addressing "environmental literacy."

Like many ecocompositionists or teachers otherwise concerned with cultivating environmental literacy, Long views his pedagogical practices and philosophies as related to Paulo Freire's concept of "critical consciousness" in particular (Freire: 1996). A greater awareness of students' own reality can increase their ability to foment needful changes in that reality—which today are highlighted by well-recognized environmental and social issues at a planetary scale as well as myriad regional local issues. Accordingly, in today's context of economic globalization, as explained by Henry Giroux, "literacy as a way of changing the world [has] to be reconceived within a broader understanding of citizenship, democracy, and justice that [is] global and transnational" (Giroux: 1997 quoted in Long: 2001, p. 132). Again, this represents a call to redefine literacy, accounting for the fact that previous conceptualizations of literacy are no longer adequate for today's context for various reasons—they may lack both environmental and "global and transnational" components. As Long explains, "the ambitious goal of linking academic and ecological literacy hinges, in part, on redefining the term literacy and then using it to address the local and global dimensions of environmental problems" (p. 132). It hinges, in other words, on what academic literacy has typically failed to address thus far but is now seen as needing to address. Some thinkers promoting such change, including David Orr, have even "[argued] for placing environmental education at the center of a liberal education that seeks to develop whole, balanced persons" (Orr: 1992 cited in Long: 2001, p. 132). But such an effort would involve more than simply introducing environmental themes in class: "Its explicit goal is to encourage students to see the world in certain ways and to consider the moral and political implications of their life-style. The pedagogical outcome would then be students able to make reasoned choices based on an environmental ethic" (Long, p. 133). In the EFL context, the pedagogical outcome of such an approach would extend to language production itself, as they would be considering the implications of their target language acquisition and production for themselves in their own environment as well as seeing it in the context of the wider world.

However, the question of how to present such an environmental ethic and lead students to examine their own lifestyles is not easily answered, and there have been notable missteps associated with otherwise well-meaning efforts to raise environmental awareness, as Long explains:

The working definition of environment guiding the field of environmental education conflates the inclusive term *environment* with the exclusive term *nature*. Working within the limited conceptual framework of this definition, the environmental educator understands human beings and their culture as apart from the natural world. In practice, this reductive definition leads environmental educators to lead the ritual pilgrimage of students from the "isolated indoor practices" of the traditional classroom with the intent of reconnecting students to the natural world. … However, with notable exceptions, the ritual of retreat to nature in the writing course simply leads most students nowhere. What students actually find in writing *from* nature is not reconnection but reconfirmation of their existing sense of place in the world. (p. 135)

Here Long presumably refers to students in the US, but this issue applies equally, or perhaps with even greater urgency, to EFL students at any level, who are already by default entering a politically charged educational realm in which the worst manifestation of "reconfirming their place in the world" would be to have the English-speaking sphere presented as a more advanced, righteous, and worthy world than their own, perpetuating a centuries-long oppressive pattern (Motha: 2014). On the other hand, a pointed effort to focus on students' local environments in the English classroom could be productive and even liberating, but as Long illustrates, these themes must be approached with care.

He goes on to highlight an additional concern related to the dichotomy described above (the conceptual frameworks of inclusive *environment* versus exclusive *nature*), one which may have direct pedagogical consequences: "the study of *the* problem and *the* crisis of the environment leads students to write about issues of enormous complexity that quite frankly, as entry-level students, they are least equipped to handle" (p. 135). This potential challenge translates to issues in the realm of critical pedagogy and likewise to more immediate language-learning concerns. Presenting students with what amounts to a dark and complex vision of our fallen world standing in stark contrast to the pure, separate space of nature ultimately represents a failure—and furthermore, a missed opportunity—to foster a greater connection between learners and their environment, their own place, which is where critical consciousness, or any consciousness for that matter, must begin, and which is likewise an important site for learner engagement.

Long attempts to address this issue that he has identified in environmental education when he states, "Environmental literacy requires the far more difficult capacity to determine when our established habits of observation and principles of understanding do not apply to particular cases, to be able, when conditions insist, to imagine alternative ways of living in, and learning from, the world" (p. 136). However, he is quick to admit that cultivating this level of reflection is far too lofty a goal for a first-year composition class, and this is doubly so for the majority of EFL classes, even at higher levels, in which not only students' linguistic development but the goals of the course would preclude an extensive exploration of the advanced capacity Long describes. In place of cultivating this capacity, he offers an alternative:

The task for ecocomposition is to determine the pedagogical strategies and contexts to set in motion a process that students might choose to follow through these more ambitious ends. This version of ecocomposition invites students to begin thinking about the consequential ways they have already established a working relationship with the discerned features of the environment in which they are currently struggling to find a place (p. 136).

For EFL students, this "environment in which they are currently struggling to find a place" is often multifaceted and complex, as they stand with one foot in the local realm of their communities and one foot edging out the door toward the global realm, a portal supposedly opened by learning the English language. Whatever the case may be for the students in a given class, it is difficult to dispute the idea that teachers should attempt to understand their students' environments and situations, whether they fit this scenario or not. For

Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana; ISSN 1316-5216; ISSN-e 2477-9555
Año 25, n° extra 9, 2020, pp. 249-263
255

many EFL classes, a proper ecocompositionist approach could mean encouraging students' connections to and cultivating their awareness of their local environments even as their consciousness is simultaneously expanded to embrace "the global," a large and indeterminate realm that might be seen as quite alien to their home place. It is crucial to begin by leading students to think about how they have already established connections to their environments—to encourage them to nurture and perhaps reimagine their connections with the school grounds, for example, or the local neighborhood or city, rather than guiding their attention away from it. In his own context, long argues for encouraging students' connection with campus in particular as a local environment:

> [focusing on the campus environment] productively unsettles many of the limiting assumptions about what constitutes environmental literacy. Students need to reflect on how a relationship to a particular environment has been constructed—and how that relationship might be changed. But it is only by expanding the term *environment* to encompass more than discerned landscapes, and rather than simply using the term *environment* as a synonym for nature, that more students will begin to find reasons to take their relation to the environment seriously (p. 137).

In other words, though the goals of environmental literacy would likely be seen to align with the former ("[reflecting] on how a relationship to a particular environment has been constructed—and how that relationship might be changed"), expecting to bring students to that level of self-reflection is untenable without first fostering a more basic awareness and appreciation of their connection to their own place (or ensuring that this already exists and further promoting it through discussion and/or assignments).

In the EFL classroom, encouraging target language production and composition about general environmental awareness (which an examination of modern EFL textbooks will reveal is increasingly common) without encouraging learners to consider their own local environment, which can serve as a counterpoint to the global context of English, is likely to result in reduced student engagement at best, which could have direct pedagogical consequences. In more severe cases, it will foster a lack of awareness or concern for students' own place, which again mirrors the darker trends that have contributed to English becoming a global language in the first place (Motha: 2014), though no instructor would claim to consciously desire this outcome. Long explains how his own ecocomposition-inspired course takes such issues into consideration:

> The course invites students to consider the enterprise of writing as a complex and continuing engagement between the self and the environment. It defines writing as a process of engagement with existing structures of thought, about the past and the present, as well as the future; as a rhetorical and dialogic activity that seeks to connect the thoughts of the individual to the ideas and aspirations of the community, whether academic, disciplinary, or cultural; and it encourages a definition of composition as an attentive and disciplined process of engagement with the particular, everyday circumstances of the environment in which any act of writing takes place (p. 139).

Though not necessarily appropriate for explicit presentation in an EFL course, unit, or project focused on composition, if teachers can approach their planning and classroom objectives with this view of composition in mind, in line with the concerns detailed above, it can be beneficial in terms of both critical pedagogy and immediate, lesson-level concerns. It will give students an arena for language production and for various forms of composition in which they genuinely care about what they are meant to speak or write about (providing the teacher has been attentive to their students). Privately, teachers may feel that finding this local ground for engagement corresponds with what students ought to care about; or alternatively, students themselves will be given the space to more clearly articulate what matters to them, which the teacher can take note of as part of a recursive process of course planning.

Despite its focus on university students in the US, I argue that Long's article is relevant to EFL teachers in Latin America, particularly those teaching various forms of twenty-first century composition and especially those

interested in incorporating ecocomposition or some form of environmental education into their courses. Perhaps Long's most important point is the following, which is hopeful yet cautionary in nature:

> Calls for shifting our attention from appreciation and interpretation to intervention and action, to participation and experience rather than intellectual isolation, often rely on a disabling dichotomy between thought and action. While understandable, these calls for transformation risk limiting the potential of environmental literacy by demanding that students assume and act upon a set of values that may not be their own. As with many other academic activist agendas, ambitions for the ecocomposition course are too often guided by a belief in the continuity between what students do in the classroom and what we imagine them doing once their coursework comes to an end. In fact, the greatest risk for a course in ecocomposition is to determine the continuity between coursework and the work of life in advance (p. 141-142).

Indeed, rather than envisioning what students will do in the future or imagining any particular continuity extending from within the classroom to without, it is important to focus on where students are now, to ask them to bring their worlds to class in a way that is both engaging and comfortable, and then, in a carefully thought-out manner that might involve the global interactivity of the internet, for example, to discuss and reach out to the complex new worlds that students may enter via the English language. An EFL course informed by ecocomposition might proceed fruitfully from this grounded, generalized starting point.

Long offers relevant meditations on incorporating environmental education into other pedagogical efforts, which may appeal not only to EFL teachers but to any instructor in the early 21st century who wishes to take steps toward a more environmentally literate classroom. He recounts the following:

> I have learned to appreciate the elusiveness of the ecological and human systems we ask our students to better understand. Similarly, I have learned that the literacies of environmental writers and activists are, at their very best, fundamentally speculative. And I have learned to humbly acknowledge that even the best versions of the human relationship to the environment, and the most important and consequential solutions to problems of environmental concern, have been the product of thinking beyond a set of assumptions about what should or should not be done (p. 142).

Just as any experienced outdoorsperson will enter an actual wilderness with humility, intending to go lightly and ever conscious of the complexity and tentativeness of the surrounding beauty and their presence within it, educators who wish to bring the environment into the classroom must tread with similar care. These educators must understand that in order to truly undertake to protect the beauty of that other world out there—which will likely be a small step at best, at least as a language instructor—this beauty must be understood to exist on a continuum with the darkest, most trash-filled corner of the city, which likewise pulses with a life force and which some student might skillfully navigate on a daily basis on their way home.

Long ends his essay with this thought: "Yes, I have affirmed why we need to move our students outside the single idea that human beings are the center of all things; but I have been reminded why we need to help them understand, again and again, how the human center gives meaning to the world in radically specific, and consequential ways" (p. 143). The latter point must not be lost sight of in the EFL classroom; indeed, especially in the international context of foreign language teaching, it must be expanded to be understood not as *the* human center but as many shifting, overlapping human spheres of knowledge and meaning, which ought not be dismissed or placed in a hierarchy—at least, this is not the business of the language teacher. Instead, we should encourage students to start where they are, from their own human centers: their families, friends, and neighbors; their educational and local/regional/national communities. From here they can better approach the global realm to which English offers a door, and, simultaneously, they can be better prepared to widen their knowledge and cognizance and share that which they already possess, of their own neighborhoods, cities,

lands, and beyond, buoyed by a reaffirmed recognition of being at home in the world and in their own perceptions of it yet able to express their place in a new language and to a greatly expanded audience. In cautiously considering what our students might do in the future, cultivating this general type of perception and ability can be both pedagogically equitable, if properly planned and executed, and environmentally sound.

## ENGAGING THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Though it must be acted upon with great care, the impulse to have one eye on students' potential futures begins with the same productive move as does considering their lives outside the classroom in the present. This action allows for the possibility of addressing the theory-practice gap of environmental engagement and simultaneously increasing student motivation, which Annie Merrill Ingram (2001) describes in the context of ecocomposition, offering a model based on service learning, which allows students to work outside the classroom in meaningful engagement with the community. Relating such activity directly to the pedagogical goals of composition, she explains, "students who work outside the class and in the community develop the trust and interactive skills that enable them to succeed in composition activities such as peer review and substantive revision" (p. 210). Though service learning is not what I aim to discuss in this paper, it can provide useful analogies to ecocomposition-inspired projects that might be carried out in the EFL classroom, which if not involving actual service, could be seen to involve the creation of a "virtual" service (such as the creation of a local wiki [Lundin: 2008, Walker & White: 2013]) that involves going out into the local community. Such projects can be carried out in EFL locations in which actual opportunities for service learning as it is commonly conceived are limited or nonexistent; these alternative projects would still involve students setting out together into the community to do meaningful work. In describing her own service learning endeavors as a professor, Ingram refers to an important factor in facilitating this outreach:

> Service learning need not—indeed, should not—replicate the kinds of anthropocentric hubris and domination that have led to the current state of ecological crisis. Service learning, in contrast to service per se, tries to avoid such pitfalls by integrating the extra-disciplinary with the curricular: by preparing students intellectually for their extracurricular projects beforehand and engaging them in thoughtful reflection afterward, service learning as a whole encourages students to analyze their attitudes toward the environment (p. 214).

This view does not rely on the harmful dichotomy illustrated by Long, which traverses the axis of action versus thought as well as that of the pure natural world versus wherever students actually are. On the contrary, Ingram calls for preparation for the explicit melding of the classroom and the community through a pronounced pedagogical effort both before and after the actual community involvement. In an EFL setting, with the type of pedagogical approach I have suggested, this general pattern could be superimposed to include the exploration of existing locally relevant authentic materials, materials in English that deal with local locations or themes (Thomas: 2014). This would obviously include linguistic foci relevant to curricular objectives, and it would occur prior to students actively engaging with their own place by creating their own authentic materials to share with a wider, more global context. The final step would involve reflecting on the experience as speakers of English as a foreign language who have bridged not only the classroom and the local environment but also the realms of the local and the global—that is, writing as bona fide members of a global community, via composition and meaningful communication in English—in addition to their own local communities.

In a similar vein, and one that is, incidentally, highly relevant to foreign language learning goals in particular, Ingram addresses intellectual development:

> Reflection and evaluation should always be included in the service learning process. Early on, guided reflection (asking students specific questions about their service experience) can give them models for

thinking about the experience in terms of their intellectual and personal development; as they become adept at evaluating and reflecting on what they have accomplished, this kind of structured guiding will become unnecessary (p. 219).

For the EFL context, this process demonstrates how linking students with their own communities and places can facilitate a process which is essential for foreign language learning: increased autonomy in language production. If it is important for native-speaking composition students to gain an increasingly independent command of their own voices as writers, it is even more crucial for L2 writers, who indeed work in a context in which such autonomy is the end goal of not only composition but of virtually all language learning activity (Brown: 2015, p. 70). One recommendation Ingram offers toward this end in her own teaching context is to "have students keep a regular service journal: if possible, do so electronically in a format that enables all students to have access to the journal" (p. 219). Adapting such a model to ecocomposition-inspired work in the EFL classroom not only increases recognition of the discursive connections among the students as they work within their own communities from a foreign language perspective but also provides a perpetually sought-after opportunity for genuine interaction in the target language, in this case with each other as a class, facilitated by, for example, a project wiki or a class blog. This could also be extended to include interaction with other speakers of English, including native speakers, via farther-reaching online collaboration (Langer de Ramirez: 2012).

Like Long, Ingram is careful to direct would-be followers of her pedagogical model to ground their ecocomposition endeavors in a human space, though it need not be human-centric. She quotes social ecologist Murray Bookchin, who states that "only insofar as the ecology movement consciously cultivates an anti-hierarchical and a non-domineering sensibility, structure, and strategy for social change can it retain its very identity as the voice for a new balance between humanity and nature and its goal for a truly ecological society" (1991, quoted in Ingram: 2001, p. 215). Ingram offers her own interpretation and example of this concept: "Sustainable practices … consider the impact of humans not only *on* their environment, but also *in* their environment. Preserving the rain forests, for example, is short-sighted at best and exclusionary and inhumane at worst if it neglects the economic viability of local rain forest communities" (p. 215). Similarly, pedagogy inspired by ecology, whether the ecological nature of discourse and our students' relationships to place or pressing global environmental realities and concerns, must also be anti-hierarchical, which in many cases will mean grounding such approaches in the students' local environment first and mindfully reigning in personal views and tendencies on the part of the instructor, especially if they are distant from or fail to consider the students' realities in favor of the aforementioned conflation of *environment* with an unspoiled, threatened place apart called "nature" upon which our human world merely encroaches.

## SUSTAINABLE COMPOSITION: AN EQUITABLE BRIDGE FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

Presenting a view of ecocomposition, or sustainable composition, that is well in line with the needs of many of today's EFL teachers and students (and like most of the other thinkers discussed here, without explicitly intending to), Derek Owens opens his essay "Sustainable Composition" (2001) by sharing various concepts of *sustainability* that "present a holistic definition of [the term] useful to educators who agree that we have a responsibility to invent a locally based, pedagogical ethic informed and inspired by an awareness of the need to think and act sustainably" (p. 28). However, he goes on to point out that "the problem is that so far sustainable culture remains a goal, not a reality. … those of us in the consumer class are not living sustainably" (p. 28). This presents a conundrum, especially considering that many of today's students, including in the EFL universe, are either already part of what could be called the consumer class or aspire to be, and instructors are likely part of it as well. Owens is likely to find more supporters than detractors of his pronouncement that "institutions of higher education that ignore or work against the goal of building a sustainable culture are indefensible," but he makes sure to point out that outside of specialized disciplines such as environmental studies, "educators …

Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana; ISSN 1316-5216; ISSN-e 2477-9555
Año 25, n° extra 9, 2020, pp. 249-263
259

need to imagine ways in which sustainable pedagogy might surface in our classes" (p. 29). Such imaginative effort is required because sustainable pedagogy is not a given, and it does not necessarily come easily or automatically.

Owens believes that composition is a key discipline in which this change can happen, as a cross-disciplinary field that resists and sometimes even exists in opposition to specialization:

> The cross-disciplinary permeability of the composition classroom makes it a logical working space where students can further investigate the past and future of local environments, their current jobs and future career goals, their cultures (a number of which are increasingly at risk, especially linguistically), and their futures—all of which are and will continue to be affected by our ability to live sustainably (p. 29).

EFL composition is also cross-disciplinary, especially in the context of the World Wide Web, which has grown not only more interactive but also more accessible by orders of magnitude, and which implies a new conception of composition that practically necessitates a redefinition of the immediate goals of the language classroom. Indeed, the web likely represents many EFL students' first experiences with communicating with native English speakers (beyond the teacher, where applicable) or their first forays in creating authentic materials in the target language. This is a driving force behind language teachers' rapid adoption of web tools in their classrooms, which has been centered on various forms of increasingly interconnected composition (Walker & White: 2013, Langer de Ramirez: 2012).

Owens describes himself as "surreptitious in my approach to promote initial forays into sustainable thinking. Not only am I conscious about making my students feel that they have been misled into taking a course in ecological economics more than composition, but I have little interest in lecturing about anything, sustainability included" (p. 31). His reasons for being surreptitious are honest and relatable, and they make sense given his attentive concern for the primary curricular goal of teaching composition and students' expectations therein. These reasons are also likely to correspond to effective pedagogical choices on Owens' part, as most students in classes that are not specifically aimed at sustainability material may not want ecological themes forced upon them (though many may be interested at some level), nor can we expect them to desire, never mind pay attention to, drawn-out lectures or readings on the subject.

In place of insisting on sustainability topics, Owens is careful to pay attention to his own students and what matters to them in the pedagogical context. He continues,

> Within the composition classroom, which of course must preoccupy itself with student writing more than anything else, I am content to downplay not only the assigned readings but my own interest in sustainability in order to try and respond to my students' concerns about what they are writing about (p. 31).

To truly engage students through place-based assignments and activities (of which Owens provides several useful examples that could easily be employed in the EFL classroom), teachers will need to be prepared for the fact that themes related to sustainability may be overshadowed by other concerns that students have about their own environments, even if sustainability has been regular topics in class. Owens seems right in responding to "students' concerns about what they are writing about" in place of pushing his own interests, no matter how important those interests are; pedagogically, this move keeps the class focused on its stated aim, student writing, and it is likely to maintain learner engagement more effectively. That said, the focus can easily remain on issues of environment:

> In giving students the chance to write about and investigate themes that matter to them, it is not hard to create a classroom environment where all of us can reflect on issues directly and indirectly related to sustainability: what makes a neighborhood good or bad; what makes jobs desirable or miserable;

and what it means to preserve a culture, whether or not our prospects for the short-term future look hopeful or scary (Owens: p. 31).

This only begins to demonstrate how students' own interests can meld with issues related to their local context, and by extension a wider context of environmental awareness. Owens goes on to list several composition projects that focus on students' own environments, all of which are highly applicable in Latin American EFL classrooms, though perhaps with substantial modifications (p. 30-34). In explaining the basis for his Oral History Preservation Project, which involves interviewing an older family or community member or friend, he explains,

> Part of my motive in creating this assignment is to help students understand the value of preservation. It is the same motive one finds in various green readers, where students read about damaged ecosystems and the demise of rain forests, but for my urban and suburban students it makes more sense to work locally, and to focus on what many of them truly want to preserve: their family stories (p. 33).

It is important to bear in mind that students can fully understand values associated with sustainability, such as preservation, first hand and without having in-depth exposure to information about ecological crises. In fact, examples such as Owens' oral history project may be a more meaningful route, at least initially, to imparting a significant and lasting understanding of sustainability concepts. In an EFL context, this could naturally involve the translation of what is important to students, their families, and their communities into a language that could allow a much larger potential audience to understand.

By tapping into what matters to students in their local environments, in their own lives, Owens may be doing more to break sustainability out of its specialized realm than instructors who take a pointed and hardline approach to doing so, though he admits that he has "no idea" if his methodology will have any measurable result in terms of educating students about sustainability (p. 34). He also adds that he himself cannot claim to live a sustainable lifestyle given what he knows about the effects our species has on the biosphere, and thus he cannot expect his students to do so either. Despite his uncertainty and his own admission that he does not live completely sustainably, he likewise has developed locally-focused composition assignments that encourage sustainability for the following reasons:

> Partly out of fear—fear that if we don't make sustainability part of our ongoing conversations, regardless of what disciplines we teach in, things are just going to get worse. Partly out of a need to cultivate a space for honest communication within a culture like ours that is so pervasively silent and ignorant about the implications of our consumer addictions. Partly out of the desire to make the classroom as cross-disciplinary as I can, and in ways that ultimately relate to my students' immediate, local lives (p. 34).

All of these reasons can be seen as related to language teaching, whether at personal or academic levels, but Owens' final reason is the most relevant: the focus on sustainability that he describes, rather than drowning out students' actual concerns, invites students to bring what is most important to them into the classroom. It is a strongly integrative tendency, joining various potential academic disciplines, students' own lives within and without the classroom, and ultimately the local and the global.

**Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana; ISSN 1316-5216; ISSN-e 2477-9555**
**Año 25, n° extra 9, 2020, pp. 249-263**
**261**

*CONCLUSIONS*

Above all, the ecocompositionists above develop sustainable composition and ecocomposition based on the freedom they have as language instructors to select topics and materials. Owens asks, "If the teacher can make the students read and write about almost anything, what are *the* most important things for them to read and write about?" In attempting to answer this question, he continues:

> From this perspective, the classroom becomes a course in local, necessary knowledge – a thumbnail sketch revealing not only what the teacher deems important for students, but what is most important, period. Teachers who view their courses this way have something to contribute to conversations about the larger curriculum. Not because faculty presume to be authorities in ecological economics or regional planning or environmental studies, but because we supposedly know something about designing pedagogical environments where information from a variety of sources might be choreographed with student writing in ways that are, if we are doing our jobs, supremely relevant to students' lives (p. 35).

Applying a similar ethic to EFL courses and to EFL composition in particular aligns well with concerns related to local relevance while also addressing the global community students are ostensibly joining by learning English. This approach is refreshing and ultimately may be the most appropriate model to draw inspiration from for EFL teachers who wish to experiment with ecocomposition-inspired projects and activities in their classrooms.

Most of us are acutely aware of the stakes in the looming ecological crises we face, but ecocompositionists, while offering ways to raise awareness, are also ready to accept the limitations of their roles and the needs of their students, even when this might mean straying from ideals regarding sustainability or preservation. Importantly, though, their approach can make a difference anyway—and not in spite of this cautious attitude, but because of it. Though unabashedly comfortable with limitations that might preclude the achievement of pedagogical objectives related to sustainability, the approaches described above appear to make ecocomposition itself more sustainable and make its future as a pedagogical mainstay of composition teaching, not just in the US but in other contexts such as Latin America, a possibility. As encouraged by the environmental movement itself, it is important assign a premium value to sustainability, even if various objectives and ideals might be overrun in the process of securing it. The three teacher-scholars discussed in this paper present related visions of ecocomposition that hold that sought-after quality of offering opportunities for both sustainability and growth. The latter quality could refer to growth not only at home, but also abroad, which may in fact offer the greatest growth potential of all.

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*BIODATA*

**Andrew Lee SIGERSON:** Master of Arts in English, conc. Composition and TESOL, Northwestern State University, EEUU. Bachelor of Arts in English, conc. Literature, Ramapo College of New Jersey, EEUU. PhD student in English at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, EEUU, focusing on the subjects: L2 literacy, critical pedagogy in EFL, and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). English professor at the Instituto de Lingüística y Literatura, Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Universidad Austral de Chile, Valdivia, Chile. Website: sites.wp.odu.edu/andrewleesig/