I. ARTICLES

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Remarks on learner autonomy
and success in foreign language learning
as a measure of learner resilience

ABSTRACT. In a positively-oriented foreign language pedagogy, where learner autonomy is of utmost importance, focus should be placed on learner resilience. Subsequently, the formation of a resilient learner should be regarded as one of the aims of the formal schooling system on all levels of its functioning. The advantages of the presence of the resilient learner in a properly constructed ecosystem of the school are manifold and are, generally, aimed at generating a high degree of success in school tasks as well as at providing the human society with resilient participants.

KEYWORDS: resilience, learner resilience, surviving framework, thriving framework, resilient learner system.

1. INTRODUCTION

'Learner resilience' is a term which is proposed here in order to characterize the mentally and physically healthy (i.e. positive) attitude of a learner toward both the subject matter of his/her learning and toward the teacher who usually and traditionally looms large in the complex social-cognitive setting of the school as a social-ecological system. One should state at the beginning that the term has not been much used in modern-day pedagogy, foreign/second language pedagogy included, thus making this important domain of human communicative endeavour devoid of an essential element of the significance of the learner's need to maintain the mental-physical health, integrity and personal security in the face of the highly burdening task(s) of acquiring knowledge and skills in the presence of and under the pressure from of the teacher with whom the learner is doomed to interact. This is understood as the

school's general delivery system and delivery efficiency. Thus, it is emphasized that while interacting, it is imperative that the learner must also maintain his/her mental and physical integrity which are, in turn, regarded as the necessary ingredients of a healthy human communicating agent (hence HCA) as a member of a highly changeable network of interacting HCAs who contribute to the network's overall healthy (thus positive) functioning (see e.g. Masten 1989; Masten et al. 1990; Thomsen 2002; Waxman et al. 2004; Masten and Gewirtz 2006; Masten and Obradović 2006). Obviously, one expects that the smooth functioning of the latter, focused on attaining communicative success, must involve an interactive population of the physically and mentally healthy HCAs, both learners and teachers, who usually, under the standard and highly predictable conditions of the formal schooling system, are naturally preferred to the ones who suffer from any kinds of impairments, both congenital and acquired, and who are thus in some way considered 'hampered' HCAs (see e.g. McCormick 1995; van Schrojenstein Lantman-de Valk et al. 1997; Nicolopoulou-Stamati et al. 2007; Puppel 2009).

2. LEARNER AUTONOMY AND RESILIENCE

It is further assumed that autonomy is provided to the learner in exchange for his/her being forced towards and placed in an educational milieu, which forms a 'forced ecosystem'. The latter may be defined by means of its peculiar features of forced social binding which characterizes the learner-teacher dyad, and which, by historically and culturally justified popular social consent, has been designed to promote learning and diffusion of knowledge among the learners as novices and in anticipation of future high social and individual gains once the individual learner has been formally allowed to abandon (or has voluntarily abandoned) this forced ecosystem upon a formal completion of a particular teaching program. We must at this point differentiate between a 'healthy' HCA who may thus be defined as the one who has managed to maintain his/her integrity and a 'hampered' HCA who may be defined as the one whose integrity has been suffering from some form of defect, both congenital and acquired, as well as a result of the varied and forced (and sometimes debilitating) interactions taking place between and among the HCAs within the locally specialized network of the school, where some communicators are assigned the status of learners and some are functioning as teachers/instructors. Such a system of the HCA functioning as a network may be referred to as the 'forced' ecosystem of the school. The latter, as has already been indicated above, is focused on learner

success, while the way in which this overall goal is attained may not necessarily involve the satisfaction, security and health of the individual learners.

It is therefore necessary to emphasize at this point that within the positively-oriented pedagogy, success in any school task on the part of the learner, including success in foreign language learning, should not be accomplished within the merely 'surviving' framework, but should rather take place within the positively-loaded 'thriving' framework. The latter involves the development of awareness and participation of the learners who are necessarily resilient, that is, who are thus not only capable of being curious in their intellectual pursuits but who are also capable of feeling persistence, that is, are capable of overcoming adversity and thus are able to feel personal safety within the learning 'conduct' applied in the formal schooling system which constitutes an indispensable part of the human forced ecosystem of learning. It is therefore pertinent and essential at this point to review briefly one of the classical notions of ecology, the notion of 'resilience', so that it can be properly incorporated into the perspective of ecologically-oriented foreign language pedagogy.

The notion of 'resilience', first introduced by an eminent Canadian ecologist, Crawford S. Holling (1973), was meant to emphasize the fact that any ecological system demonstrates both persistence (constancy/stability) and efficiency (change). In the former sense, the ecological system shows resilience by returning to a single state after a perturbation. As elegantly stated by Matsinos (2010: 3000): "*Ecological systems being dynamic and often transient can shift from one stability domain to another, and this transition property characterizes the term resilience*". Furthermore, the understanding of resilience as persistence implies the presence of control and predictability in the functioning of the ecosystem.

On the other hand, the view of ecosystem resilience as efficiency (change) focuses more on the dynamic attributes of adaptability and variability as characterizing the notion of efficiency. In sum, a fully functioning ecosystem demonstrates resilience, that is, both resistance to changes and an ability to self-recover from various external (and internal) disturbances and is thus able to maintain its stability.

It is assumed that the above described approach to resilience should also be introduced into the milieu of the forced ecosystem of the school and it must, therefore, be incorporated into its successful activities. Thus, resilience, and more properly, learner resilience, is understood as a part of the positively-loaded and thriving foreign language instruction where the resilient learner, by developing his/her control over a host of exogenous factors, is supposed to attain much greater success than his/her non-resilient counterpart.

3. ADVANTAGES OF LEARNER RESILIENCE

A major assumption which can be made at this point is that a resilient foreign language learner represents a more healthy type of HCA in that s/he is more independent and less stress-sensitive while being serviced by the forced ecosystem of the school. This is especially indicated by the learner's competence in managing his/her own resilience within the said system, where it involves the interaction of both the purely social (teacher-learner dyad) and environmental-ecological elements, such as the individual learner's psychological (internal), social-cultural dimensions as the dimensions which co-determine the learner's identity.

In a properly constructed ecosystem of the school, that is, where the population of learners is composed of the resilient learners who are fully aware of being resilient in the senses described in the foregoing sections (see also Doll/Lyon 1998), the advantages of maintaining and enhancing a strong resilient learner system seem to be the following:

– persistence and curiosity are secured and maintained on a high level,
– concentration on and attention to various problems (or specific issues) is very high,
– tolerance for mistakes which can be used as tools for carrying out exploration and persistent learning is very high,
– seeking creativity and novelty as an important intellectual challenge through the resilient management of learning is very high,
– self-providing psychological resilience with the implicit aim of leading a less stressful life as a part of the general schema of human wellbeing (cf. Ong et al. 2006),
– expectation of and finding self-rewarding and self-help are very high,
– increasing the adaptive capacity of a particular learner which secures the resilient learner's functioning without a significant decline in crucial learner activities (see Folke et al. 2002; Folke et al. 2003),
– increasing and strengthening the diversity of individual learning styles is very high,
– with the maintenance of a higher population of naturally diversified and fully autonomous resilient learners, the school's general delivery system seems to be more effective both in terms of the quality of its delivery and the quality of overall health and wellbeing of the individual learners regarded as the future participants of a resilient human society,
– a resilient participant of the human society most naturally enhances the likelihood of his/her better survival in a highly changing world by adhering to the principle of building and maintaining the adaptive capacity of all the HCAs who constitute the Universal Communication Space (see Puppel 2004).

Considering the above remarks, one should conclude that one of the central tenets of the school's policy as a social-ecological system should be the focus on the creation of a resilient learner, foreign language learner included. This type of learner, while developing and maintaining the above characteristics, will at the same time be able to overcome all kinds of exogenous (as well as endogenous) forces and obstacles while attaining overall success in the learning tasks. Subsequently, the creation of this type of learner should be one of the major challenges of positive foreign language pedagogy in the years to come.

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