

15 September 2014

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PhD Education

A complex systems perspective on English Language Teaching: a case study of a language school in Greece

Abstract

This thesis is a complexity-informed ethnographic case study of a language school in Greece, which provides a rich description of how language pedagogy develops in the periphery of the English-using world. In addition, this study demonstrates the feasibility and potential of using Complex Systems Theory (CST) in the study of educational settings.

The thesis begins by describing English Language Teaching (ELT) in Greece, thus setting the scene for the empirical investigation. This is followed by a review of ELT literature, with particular reference to theories of language, pedagogy and society, and by an overview of CST, which pragmatically synthesises complex realism and post-modern ways of knowing, and defines a set of principles to guide complexity-informed empirical inquiry.

Having conceptualised the language school as a complex system, it is suggested that activity in the school was sustained by multiple intentionalities, i.e., collective, emergent, nested and generative drivers of activity. These included: (a) an imperative to provide certification to learners, (b) some learners' desire to integrate in transnational discourse communities, (c) the expectation that language learning should lead to increased awareness of 'English' culture, (d) competition against the state school system, and (e) the unstated aim of protecting the professional interests of the schools' staff and stakeholders. Intentionalities were associated with specific pedagogical outcomes and cultural outlooks, and their synthesis is defined as a dynamic of intentions.

Next, the thesis looks into the learning materials used at the language school, and it is suggested that these generated affordances which impacted pedagogy. The distribution of learning activities in the books was associated with synchronic and diachronic changes in the dynamics of intentions underpinning activity in the school. Complexity-inspired conceptual instruments, such as an 'affordance landscape' and 'attractors', are developed to describe the influence of the learning materials, and it is suggested that the learning resources used at the language school made transmissive and communicative pedagogy more likely.

The empirical component of the study concludes by describing prototypical instruction sequences that typified ELT in the language school, which evidenced traces of transmissive and communicative pedagogy. Some sequences (e.g., Reading and Vocabulary, and Transmissive Grammar) evidenced transmissive influences, which were associated with local pedagogical traditions, whereas others, such as Process-Based Writing, were more closely aligned with the communicative ideology that is mainstream in ELT.

The thesis concludes by synthesising the findings with insights from the CST literature. In doing so, it demonstrates the theoretically generative potential of a complexity informed inquiry, which can help to formulate understandings of ELT that are sensitive to the interface between systems and their environments, while providing ontologically coherent accounts of structure and agency, and of behaviours that are neither completely random nor entirely predictable.