

Brief Introduction to *Language Ecology and Language Instruction*

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Abstract

Ecology of Language and Language Instruction written by Okazaki Toshio, the professor of Tsukuba University Japan expounds the questions that young people confronted with in the globalization context and the questions in language instruction (foreign language teaching) in a perspective of ecology of language, and proposes to take an Content-Based Instruction for language class so as to develop the learners' ecology literacy while training their proficiency in language, and to help the learners to take their paths of sustainable development for their lives. This paper intends to introduce this book to Chinese readers so that the Chinese scholars put emphasis on *Ecology of Language and Language Instruction*.

Keywords

Ecology of Language, Language Instruction, Ecology Literacy, Content-Based Instruction, Brief Introduction

1. Introduction

Facing the global population issues, environmental issues and resource issues, human's living environment has become increasingly serious. The sustainable development is extremely urgent to human being. Under this circumstance, more and more people pay attention to ecology which is about the study of the interaction between human and environment. Ecology of Language was originated in the 70's of last century. It is a theory integrating the cognitive view of ecology into the study of linguistics and an exploration that the linguists made from the angle of language on the ecological crisis and human sustainable development. *Language Ecology and Language Instruction* [1] is an academic monograph, written by Japanese Linguist Okazaki Toshio, a professor of Tsukuba University, about the exploration and discussion of language education from the view of language ecology, which contain the author many years of painstaking effort. This book has discussed the language teaching problems from the perspective of the language ecology, and first put forward the conception of language

teaching and the activity design scheme with sustainable development as theme, which has the certain reference value to the foreign language teaching. The book is divided into seven parts. The article is a brief introduction to the book.

2. Preface

The preface is divided into three sections. In the first section, the author discusses the relationship of the natural ecosystem, human ecosystem and language ecosystem, and expounds the basic viewpoints of ecology. The human ecosystem is a part of the natural ecosystem, and the two ecosystems interact. Language ecosystem is gradually formed in the process of human common production and work. People communicate with language, which cause the interaction between human and nature. Therefore, the language ecosystem is the medium to cause interaction between nature and human or human beings.

The second section of the preface points out the present problems facing the human ecosystem and the task of Ecology of Language. This section firstly points out that the human being is facing an unprecedented crisis of survival. The article points out that the language ecology is closely related to the human ecology. Language is the medium for human to think and solve employment issues and food issues and etc. resulting in survival crisis, but currently it does not play its function through personal thinking of these issues. The author calls this situation “language formalization”. The author points out to break the “language formation” we should think more about the nature of problems and solutions.

The last section of the preface gives readers a few important points to understand Ecology of Language, the concept of including language ecology and language ecological environment. The end of this section gives some advice on the development trend of Japanese Teaching from the perspective of Ecology of Language. It points out to carry out the Content-Based Instruction in intermediate and advanced Japanese teaching, for it can not only break the instrumental limitations in foreign language teaching but also cultivate learners with high thinking ability, expression ability and understanding through discussion of sustainable development.

3. Chapter 1 What Is the Ecology of Language

This chapter begins with the definition, purpose and nature of discipline of ecology of language.

Haugen [2] (1972) defined “ecology of language” as a scientific study of the interaction between a specific language and its surroundings. The said surroundings include psychological and social domains. The psychological domain refers to a domain of interaction between a certain language and other languages, while the social domain refers to a domain of interaction between a certain language and its social environment, and the interaction between these two domain constitutes the ecological environment of language. The purposes of the ecology of language are to 1) analyze and record language ecology and the correlation between language ecology and surroundings; 2) preserve and develop language ecology as well as the correlation between language ecology and surroundings; 3) figure out the close correlation between language ecology and human ecology and finally develop it into human ecology [3]. The ecology of language seeks the method to preserve and develop language ecology by describing and analyzing the association between language and environment, as it were, the ecology of language is a part of human ecology.

This book then presents the development history of language maintenance theory, describes Accommodation Theory, Language Shift/Maintenance Theory, Language Vitality Theory, Reversing Language Shift: RLS Theory, Ecological Theory and other theories themed language shift and maintenance, and specifies the main idea of language ecology (language ecology = human ecology). Due to the impact of economic, social and other factors, the language in the ecological advantages tends to have a negative effect on the language in ecological disadvantages and its language speaker, indicating that the language ecology has a direct effect on people’s life quality. This chapter mentions the immigration ecological problem in the end and indicates that living state of immigrants has a significant effect on their first language and second language ecology. The living state of immigrants depends on the host country’s labor policy, housing policy, social assistance policy and other policies, and only the effective association of various policies can immigrants’ living state and language ecology be improved.

4. Chapter 2 Ecology of Language in Shrinking Imagination

This chapter has two sections, and the first section states problems in both human ecology and language ecology

during the process of global integration from a language ecology perspective by taking the shrinkage of imagination as a starting point.

This chapter takes the word “employment” as an example to specify the change in connotation of language. In the era of Japan’s lifetime employment system, “employment” is the mainstay of the employee’s life and is associated with “income”, “livelihood”, “marriage”, “children”, “retirement”, “life “ and so on. However, since the implementation of time-limited employment in Japan, “employment” no longer has a meaning of “labor creates livelihood”, and young people can hardly see hopes for the future, which is called “collapse of survival formula” in this book, indicating that people’s imagination is shrinking and fails to keep pace with the change in the world.

Imagination is counted as ability in this book. The ability view for ecology of language is that ability is not an isolated entity but evolved from the interaction of human, events and objects. In other words, imagination is developed from the correlation of language ecology, human ecology and natural ecology, and thus the well association of these three factors allows language for imagination to function to its fullest, or otherwise, the poor association will make it difficult to present the imagination manifested in language. At present, the dramatic changes in the world cause the shrinkage of imagination which can be seen mainly from the “formalization” of language. For example, it is hard for people to associate “employment”, “food crisis” and other words with their real life, that is to say these words fail to express the profundity of issues.

The second section of this chapter elaborates the thought pattern for ecology of language. From the standpoint of ecology of language, the solution to the shrinkage of imagination shall focus on the association between such issue and other matters. The author suggests that if we could think the relationship between individual and human, events and objects in the world from the individual level and compare the difference between personal idea and others’ ideas, we will have a more comprehensive understanding of the world, which helps the development of imagination.

5. Chapter 3 Ecology of Language and Language Instruction

This chapter is designed to discuss the attack human ecosystem is suffering from the global integration process by taking employment and food issues which are fundamental to human survival, indicating that it is necessary to implement education oriented to sustainable development for language instruction.

This chapter first describes the social changes in the process of global integration. This chapter takes Japan as an example and points out that Japan’s traditional lifetime employment system has been replaced by time-limited employment system under the influence of global integration in order to enhance its international competitiveness, which causes the increase in the number of informal employees year by year. The less-guaranteed work and life of informal employees bring a number of uncertainties and difficulties to marriage, children and life after retirement. Similar situations also happen to many other countries. Such changes have some influence in school and home education. From the aspect of school education, with the increasingly fierce international competition, many countries have targeted the cultivation of talents with fighting strength, and the higher education is made elaborate and emphasizes the specialization too much regardless of developing learners’ ability to survive in society under the global integration. From the aspect of home education, society for youngsters’ time is different from that for their parents’ time, preventing the youngsters from using their parents’ experience and value outlook as a reference, so home education cannot work appropriately, and the youngsters is totally unprepared for the society.

Faced with this situation, the author encourages the cultivation of learners’ ability to survive in a society under global integration by the application of across curriculum. The author points out that language instruction has laid increasing emphasis on the language learning materials content in recent years, which perfectly satisfies the essential condition for across curriculum. The course of language instruction can use not only literary works as materials of listening, speaking, reading and writing, but environmental problems and economical and social issues under global integration as material for a series of learning activities.

This chapter finally stresses the present situation youngsters are confronted with and the necessity of pursuit of sustainable development and indicates that it is essential to develop “ecology literacy” in order to change this situation.

6. Chapter 4 Topic and Method for Training Ecology Literacy

This chapter consists of three sections. The first section discusses about the concept of ecology literacy. The

ecology literacy refers to world outlook, way of life, interpersonal relationship, self cognition, and to be specific, they are respectively involved in “what the state of world is like?”, “how to survive in such world?”, “what about the interpersonal relationship in such world?” and “how to recognize the self in such circumstance?” The purpose of cultivating ecology literacy is to encourage youngsters to ponder these four problems, so that they can determine their respective life paths for sustainable development. Imagination is the focus of cultivating ecology literacy. The author suggests that thinking and analyzing the reason for employment and food issues and their trends are nothing else than the process of developing imagination and ecology literacy.

The second section of this chapter presents problem and its solution on Japanese Instruction. The author explains that the current instruction stresses the cultivation of language as a tool too much, and teaching content is oriented to pattern practice, conversation and listening, and such practices are uncorrelated each other in the absence of further consideration and discussion on what is learned. This teaching approach neglects the development of learner’s ability to think, so a number of overseas students are found to be in learning difficulties after attending universities or graduate schools in Japan. Such problem also exists in the field of foreign education in China. Wen Qiufang *et al.* [4] (2010) have found from their study and investigation that college students in English major have a thinking ability obviously lower than other arts students. With reference to the analysis on this phenomenon, they point out that from the cognitive perspective, learning content is lack of the required challenge on students’ ability to think, and in terms of the process of learning language, mechanical imitation, memorization and repetition practices are adverse to the training of thinking ability.

As a breakthrough point of current language instruction issues, the author encourages the application of Content-Based Instruction and the introduction of learning materials concerning employment and food problems fundamental to human survival, and listening, speaking, reading and writing activities shall be preferable for the development of learner’s comprehensive language competence and the cultivation of student’s ecology literacy. It is stressed that we shall choose information closely related to personal life, only in this way can learners be truly involved in learning.

7. Chapter 5 Cultivation of Language Ecological Literacy

The fifth chapter makes a detailed description of the cultivation process of the ecological literacy of the individuals from the perspective of the relevance between human ecology and language ecology. This chapter is about the employment problems supporting human survival and food crisis. The author uses 8 steps to describe the cultivation method of ecological literacy.

[Step 0] Specific examples of cultivating ecological literacy: take the dialogue of two overseas students in classroom as example, and put forward to use “problem-posing education” and “role lettering method” to cultivate the ecological literacy.

[Step 1] see the world with self as starting point: problems of Japanese university students in the school and at work, and serious employment status of world’s young people.

[Step 2] sort through the relevance of individuals and the world: their respective difficulties of formal Japanese young employees and temporary Japanese young employees in the work.

[Step 3] find out the relevance of the individual and the world: the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 to employment policies of Asian countries and the youth employment issue.

[Step 4] worldwide relevance of things weaved with employment as center: what is globalization? What is the relationship between globalization and employment?

[Step 5] other relevance of things irrelevant to employment in the process of globalization: the relationship of environment, food, water and petroleum under globalization.

[Step 6] The macro analysis of relevance of things under globalization and “my” role: by thinking of four issues about ecological literacy, analyze the relevance of things from the perspective of globalization and “my” role in the globalization.

[Step 7] methodology of thinking of individual life path: ask learners thinking “what is happiness to me” and write down them with words.

The above 1 - 7 steps show readers the formation process of globalization step by step and the relevance of various problems, mainly related to employment, in the process of globalization. At the end of each step, the author also designed classroom activities for the cultivation of ecological literacy respectively. These activities do not only provide certain reference to the language classroom for carrying out Content-Based Instruction,

meanwhile guide the reader to reflect their own survival way under globalization.

The fifth chapter introduces the status of the world in macro, at the same time asks learners to dialogue around the content, and find out the relevance of themselves and the world and people around. Combining the world and personal survival development is the pursuit of the ecological literacy.

8. Conclusions

From the perspective of the preservation of the human ecosystem, this book takes “language” and “human” as the focus and discusses how to develop individual ecological literacy. The conclusion of this book points out we cannot forget that language and human are part of nature. Only when the language ecosystem, human ecosystem and natural ecosystem maintain in a good state, can these three sections continue in the state of sustainable development.

The book *Language Ecology and Language Instruction*, from the perspective of language ecology, deems that the existing problems of the young come down to two aspects, “imagination atrophy” and “language of poverty”. The book points out that it is very necessary to break traditional instrumental instruction mode and take Content-Based Instruction mode. The book helps learners establish their own way of life through learning of employment problems and food crisis and cultivates learners with ecological literacy. The whole book runs through the author’s concern on the survival situation of the young and his expectation to the future. Through detailed discussion, the author shortens the distance of readers and environment, food and employment issues under globalization. The author points out in his book, “since the birth of the universe, human history is miraculously able to continue in a wide variety of opportunities. Therefore, that closely correlate our way of life with the nature is a kind of return to the nature”. It shows the love of author to life and nature. This book gives practical way to teach us how to feedback and give thankfulness to the nature. The publication of the book marked language education to a new stage of development, which has certain significance in language education in our country. This book will become a representative work about ecology of language and language instruction research.

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