

## THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS AS AN ECOLINGUISTICS ENVIRONMENT TO INCREASE LEARNERS' AUTONOMY

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**Abstract:** Due to globalization, the amount of digital resources to learn and teach languages has increased dramatically. These resources have helped students learn English and they have been also promoting their autonomy providing a propitious environment for learning; furthermore, the connectivity between different people brings numerous benefits, if used properly. However, these digital technologies are helpless if the learner does not perceive its importance and reframes their conventional usage, realizing it as a learning tool. Therefore, the main purpose of this work is to point out how these digital tools tend to give more autonomy to the learner and can facilitate the whole language learning/acquisition process. After revising the literature in both areas – digital resources used to learn English and learners' autonomy – I describe the importance of technology to learning a second language, relating the concepts of digital resources working as an ecolinguistic system used to interact in the target language, and learners' autonomy. Finally, I reflect on the effects of using this technology, as a natural interaction environment of informal learning that may affect learners' autonomy.

Keywords: Digital Resources; Ecolinguistics Environment; Learners' Autonomy.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of civilization, the necessity of tools to facilitate peoples' lives is evident; however, the globalization of the twentieth century brought a new framework of technological artifacts, the digital one. This type of technology has been changing the world in many aspects, such as human social behavior, communication, business and learning.

Considering that new technologies are providing opportunities which were unimaginable some years ago, the process of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)<sup>1</sup> has gained a new connotation besides the formal learning. As communication added the status of digital to itself, learning – specifically – EFL is a challenge that has been facilitated by *affordances*, which Paiva (2010) understands as diverse environments besides the classroom itself. In addition to that, it is possible to understand that digital environments have affordances, for example by propitiating more interaction with authentic language, since the physical frontiers have been brought down.

Concerned about the necessity of having this interaction with real language and the challenges faced by a learner in a non-native English speaking country to find those samples,

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1 EAL, according to Jordão (2014), is mostly seen with the same connotations of EFL, but a few authors understand this term as different from English as a Second Language (ESL), because according to her, there is a “[...] perception that prefers considering languages learned after the first one as ‘additional’ instead of ‘second’ since the increasing number of subjects that know a second, third, fourth or fifth language.”. As a conclusion, Jordão (2014) reveals that in multilingual contexts the most common term is EFL, but when addressing immigrants that learn a language where they live, the term to be used is EAL. After these brief comments about nomenclatures, I will use EAL because I consider the environment that surrounds the learner a source that allows me to understand the possibility the learner has to socially interact with this (virtual) context he is living in. For example, an English learner in Brazil, which is a non-native English speaking country, shall experience learning EAL through digital resources, as he may have a broad language contact if he is immersed in a virtual community that permits him to do so.

I chose to highlight the English learners that learn EFL using digital technology to be exposed to the language and understand it as an interaction alternative, even though there is an amount of songs, movies, podcasts, streaming television and audios in English some learners are exposed to.

Snyder (2007, p. 399) warns that “it is still common for educators to think of technology in terms of tools, implements and applications”. According to her this perspective is very limited, as there are also numerous possibilities, such as websites, CD-ROMs, DVDs, multimedia, video games and virtual reality softwares, among others.

Still according to Snyder (2007, p.399), the perspective above is not wrong, but it is very strict because “it impedes the understanding of technology’s social and cultural dimensions. [...] Technology is a form of social practice”. This perspective visualizes technology in a broader sense, and if the learner perceives it as social and cultural practices, he may understand its importance and search on it until he may be able to accomplish his own purposes on learning.

Thus, understanding that digital technologies can aid a learner to make decisions in different ways, such as, interacting – virtually – with the world in English, feeling as an active citizen that reveals his identity or not (fact that, we assume, facilitates his self-discovery and self-confidence as a language user), and giving him the responsibility of how to use it.

Furthermore, the approach used in this work is the ecolinguistic one, that according to Couto (2009, p. 173), “ecolinguistics is literally the subject that addresses the relations between language and the environment”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, utilizing this perspective I may theoretically understand the affordances contained in an ecolinguistic environment by the bibliographical qualitative research this is.

Hence, the research question I will explore and reflect about is: assuming that digital tools establish an ecolinguistics environment, can they facilitate English learning by giving students autonomy? Furthermore, the central theme of this research is not the formal learning

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<sup>2</sup> “**Ecolinguística** é literalmente a disciplina que se ocupa das relações que se dão entre língua e meio ambiente” (translation by the author)

process, but the informal one that can, according to Warschauer (2010), be possibly provided by the positive potentiality of technology as a tool.

In this study, I will approach firstly the possibility of using technology to learn EFL in an informal means, and secondly I will discuss the dichotomy existing between learning and autonomy – not only perceived as a mere individual process, but as a social practice –, and the perceptual possibility of affordances found in technological resources in an ecolinguistic environment for learning. Then, I will debate some considerations about how most teachers understand autonomy, and I will finally conclude with the final comments encompassing the topics discussed.

### **Using Digital Technology to Learn EFL Informally**

The overspread of digital technology due to globalization provided new ways of understanding learning and teaching languages. Warschauer (2010, p. 13) argues that “we consider three prominent applications for immersive learning: virtual environments, social network sites and multiplayer online games”. These features contain some affordances that provide, for instance, learners possible interaction in digital simulated realities, and by getting immerse in this context learn in an informal way an additional language.

Tomlinson (2011) mentions the importance of learners’ confidence, which is facilitated by the fact that many students feel comfortable using technology. However, the learner must feel at ease manipulating technological artifacts to achieve the learning purpose in this technological perspective, and not only for having fun by surfing online or for any other reason not related to the language learning.

As this affective feeling is something to be considered, the concept of *Digital Immigrants* by Prensky (2001) is remarkably relevant: he characterizes as digital immigrants people who were not born into the digital world, but had to have the inevitable contact with it. In Prensky's (2001, p. 1) words: “those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are, and always will be compared to them, *Digital Immigrants*.”

Consequently, it can be inferred that *digital immigrants* tend to have more difficulties at the practical usage of technological instruments; therefore, I assume that they may also feel

uncomfortable using technology to learn English, and should search for other possibilities that facilitate the accomplishment of their purposes. On the other hand, *Digital Natives* (PRENSKY, 2001, p. 1) are the ones who were already born into the digital world and have constant interaction with it, so that they would feel at ease to use technology with learning purposes, and should consider using it as a possibility to do so.

This distinction is very important, for example, to a teacher who can adequate his lessons or to a person who wants to learn independently from a formal educational system and still has doubts on how to do it. As Prensky (2001, p.2) says:

The importance of the distinction is this: as Digital Immigrants learn – like all immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their "accent," that is, their foot in the past. The “digital immigrant accent” can be seen in such things as turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than assuming that the program itself will teach us to use it.

After understanding these differences, it is relevant to consider that besides the uncomfortable feeling of digital immigrants by using digital technology to learn, there are also negative affective factors, such as unpleasant class schedule, exhausting hours of work, misleading classes, difficulties to deal with learning tools, such as textbooks, methods, or even technological resources that can create barriers and may harden the acquisition/learning process. Besides, there are affective features to be molded by the learner himself, according to the possibilities of formal or informal learning.

In relation to terminology, I follow Gramegna (2012) when she argues about *Informal Learning*, which according to her “means that the learning process happens unconsciously, unintentionally, incidentally, naturally, anywhere at any time without any method, by various means, alone or in cooperation with others, often for pleasure”.

This process provides learners the possibility of becoming autonomous. And I do not underestimate the learner's capacity of working his memory to make sense of new language structure or vocabulary, as well as the creation of strategies to develop learning by himself. Therefore, my focus is on the learner's acquisition process facilitated by technological tools, even though I perceive that the teacher's role to provoke stimuli and motivation on students may affect their learning process.

When learners that feel at ease working with technology understand it as a resource to informal learning and start their learning process, they are exposed to digital resources such as the internet where they may find a huge amount of input that can be considered authentic, because they present real language being used in real people's lives. More importantly, the language found in this context is used with social purposes, which Tomlinson (2011) characterizes as the creation of situations that demand variations that were not previously taught.

This characteristic suits well with a positive aspect of technology used as informal learning: the time of exposure to real language. While in a regular school or in a language school a student would be exposed to the language for three or four hours per week, the time to be spent with technology is limitless and the exposure could possibly be more efficient. Otherwise, the learner must understand the purposes he has to achieve or he will be immersed into an environment full of useless information, transforming an affordable time into a waste of it.

The exposure to real language is therefore fundamental so that learners will experience how the language is typically used in real life situations, but Tomlinson (2011, p.14) argues that it is, though, not enough "because they [learners] also need to notice how it is used and to use it for communicative purposes themselves". However, digital resources possess an enriching exposure to real language; linguistic production abilities (speaking and writing) are not emphasized and must be practiced by using other strategies designed by the learner himself and his learning beliefs.

Another important resource digital tools possess is the feedback possibility, which dismisses the necessity of an instructor as anyone can create a blog, a wiki or a video and post it online. This possibility is unique as people around the world can give their opinions, interact and learn with each other. The evaluation made online, for example, may bring new perspectives to the learner who sometimes prefers to disguise his identity – which is quite common – to avoid public exposure of mistakes and create an affective barrier.

The learner can also mold this fertile field of input, because he has an enormous quantity of material available and he must be the one to decide what is profitable for learning and what is not. Subsequently, technological tools give learners the responsibility for making

decisions of what and how to use the samples found in there, and after understanding this tool as a learning possibility, a more attentive learner can forge himself the digital resources to search for the specific purpose he wants to accomplish.

Learning a language in an informal way is not a simple task, but the fact that the learner will likely encounter less demand out of the classroom may be helpful. Informally, learners make their own schedule of engagement to the language (what requires a lot of commitment) and assume their own speech direction, for example. Students also feel freer to interact due to the fact that there is no teacher's correction, and no necessity to reveal their identities. On the other hand, the formal learning has many problems. For instance, generally the learner's purpose is simply to have a grade to continue studying at school; it is most probable that he will not learn the language in its functional and communicative features by performing activities only when frightened by a score he has to reach (LEFFA, 2002). Nevertheless, Leffa (2002, p. 8) says:

the very few students I met personally that were able to acquire a functional knowledge of the foreign language, were autonomous, students that went beyond the required in class on their own. This makes me think that, except for the immersion cases, learning a foreign language is possible only if the student is autonomous. If not he will stop in what is ministered in class, and this is not enough to acquire the domain of a language.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to infer that Leffa (2002) understands autonomy as a presupposition to learning, so that when students do not have real language experiences – from autonomy –, their learning possibilities decrease considerably. After analyzing all these favorable and unfavorable features brought by digital resources, in the following I explore the dichotomist field of autonomy and learning, and discuss EFL affordances and the effects it brings to the autonomy of learners.

### **Autonomous Learner and Ecolinguistics Environments**

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3 “Os pouquíssimos alunos que conheci pessoalmente e que foram capazes de adquirir um conhecimento funcional da língua estrangeira, foram autônomos, alunos que por conta própria foram muito além do que lhes foi exigido na sala de aula. Isso me leva a pensar que, excetuados os casos de imersão, só é possível aprender uma língua estrangeira se o aluno for autônomo. Se não for assim, ele vai ficar apenas no que é dado na sala de aula, e isso não basta para adquirir o domínio de uma língua.” (Translated by the author)

Ecolinguistics is a contemporary field of linguistics that according to Silva and Gomes (2012, p. 48) is “[...] dedicated to the study of the relations between the language and its respective social environment”<sup>4</sup>, so that these relations have their basis on the constructivist theories which basically demand experience to learning.

The demands of experiences that make a learner develop when engaged in, specifically a foreign language, “first appear in the inter-psychological plane and it is then appropriated by the individual” (Gutiérrez, 2006 *apud* Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the inner psychological is responsible for the cognitive responses first; the social interaction is further responsible for the development that enables the internalization of the concepts.

The mediation proposed in Vygotsky works are very significant to the field of language learning, because the learners’ interpretations and perceptions of different stimuli are propitiated by the mediation of cultural artifacts (PAIVA, 2009). There are spatial dependence, and a dependence on the possibilities of objects that mediate the learner’s contact with the additional language. Furthermore, Paiva (2009) produces a list of these spatial facts and mediating objects that she understands as essential mediation tools: “[...] native and non-native speakers, teacher who are proficient or not, other learners, family members, radio, TV, cinema, computer, recorder, iPod, cell phone, CD, DVD, newspapers, magazines and books”<sup>5</sup>. These possible tools may affect the way learners absorb knowledge, and consequently learn.

Conceptualize what is learning is a hard task, though Snyder (2007) considers a promising concept when she addresses an autonomous perspective to it revealing that

[...] a growing acceptance of young people pursuing their own objectives towards knowledge inspired but not necessarily directed by their teachers. According to this view, when students take responsibility for their own learning they can regard the classroom as offering a set of resources that are largely under their control.

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<sup>4</sup> “[...] dedicada ao estudo das relações entre a língua e o seu respectivo meio ambiente social” (translated by the author)

<sup>5</sup> “[...] falantes nativos ou não, professor proficiente ou não, outros aprendizes, familiares, rádio, tv, cinema, computador, gravador, ipod, celular, cd, DVD, jornais, revistas e livros.” (Translated by the author)

This perspective is also commented by Paiva (2005b) when she discusses learner's autonomy by saying that

[...] the old approaches were teacher-centered and no autonomous learning attempt was expected. Translating lists of disconnected words or nonsense sentences; memorizing dialogues at home in order to please the teacher cannot be considered as instances of autonomy.

Therefore, we can conclude that this perspective which addresses autonomy to learning does not regard the traditional school system as an autonomy-builder to learners, considering that these practices are frequently observed in many regular schools. In different words, she does not consider the regular school an ecolinguistics environment to propitiate the development students' autonomy.

Paiva (2005a) also argues that “[autonomy] ideas are implicit in good learners' strategies, such as the wish to communicate and the auto-monitoring.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I understand that when teachers use adequate digital tools as resources to facilitate learning, it shall instigate the strategies cited above and consequently provide the means, so that students achieve a more effective and easy learning.

Despite the fact learners shall have these experiences of communicating and practicing auto-monitoring, Leffa (2002, p. 11) argues that schools are not necessarily the best place to learn. Subsequently, when he points out the restrictions present in schools he says that “the general idea is that we learn more outside than inside schools, despite the didactic resources the school has to offer such as libraries, laboratories, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

The school's role should be as a motivator to provide learning conditions, because teaching autonomy is possible, but teaching in an autonomous way is a very difficult task. When writing a research paper, for example, we show how dependent we are on other peoples' discourses and speeches, and the constant need we have to have this dialogue between ideas and then formulate our own and reproduce them to the paper in an academic format (LEFFA, 2002).

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6 “Essa ideia está implícita nas estratégias utilizadas pelo bom aprendiz, tais como o desejo de comunicar-se e a auto-monitoração” (Translated by the author)

7 “A ideia geral é de que se aprende mais fora do que dentro da escola, apesar dos recursos didáticos que a escola pode oferecer como bibliotecas, laboratórios, etc.” (Translated by the author)

The results revealed by the analysis of a language learning experiences project from Paiva (2009) demonstrate that, according to learners:

classrooms do not give the necessary affordances to an additional language acquisition, but these learners supply this bracket searching for affordances outside school. What is found by many learners in classrooms are fragmented samples of the language, usually artificial, that do not propitiate communicative actions, but mechanic nonsense actions. Acknowledging this, learners will search for affordances that will stimulate them to act, by interaction with other speakers, or by aesthetic emotion, or playfulness, or for the search for information<sup>8</sup>

It is, therefore, important to reinforce the importance of the perception of affordances – nowadays, a big amount of them contained inside digital tools or resources that could be found using technology – which were searched, filtered and used by the own learner. Indirectly, the limitation of this kind of school mentioned above brings advantages to learners by leaving a bracket for the learner himself to fulfill with whatever he sees profitable. In other words, there is a possibility that school's limitations force learners to acquire an autonomous learning style.

This limited aspect of schools shows the constant need of updated professionals that need to know how to deal with the fast pace our contemporary world has, as non-capable professionals have problems to overcome this immersion on obsolete technology. This feature is widely seen in many fields, as cited above. Research references, for instance, will probably need to be revised if they are five or six years old, and the same happens to teaching/learning strategies; they can go from perfect to old fashioned very quickly.

Therefore, to keep up with the globalized world's pace, it is necessary to emerge on technology and see it not only as a mere set of tools. For Snyder (2007, p. 400 *apud* Bruce 1999), “to think of technology in terms of tools, implements, techniques and know-how alone

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8 “A sala de aula não fornece os propiciamentos necessários para a aquisição de uma outra língua, mas esses alunos suprem as lacunas buscando propiciamentos no ambiente externo a escola. O que os alunos encontram em muitas salas de aula são amostras fragmentadas do idioma, frequentemente artificiais, que não propiciam ações comunicativas, mas ações mecânicas desprovidas de sentido. Em vista disso, os aprendizes vão em busca de propiciamentos que lhes estimulem a agir, seja pela interação com outros falantes, seja pela emoção estética, seja pela ludicidade, ou pela busca de informação.” (Translated by the author.)

is to limit our conception of technology to just one of its three component dimensions”. This limiting perspective does not perceive the social practice and understands technology as culturally neutral. In contrast, I defend that technology contain numerous socially situated affordances that are full of cultural content, as any artifact, it offers multiple affordances which shall be perceived by the learner. (SILVA and GOMES, 2012)

When related to the field of second language acquisition, Paiva (2009) defines the term affordance as “the relation between the learner and the language, in other words, how he perceives this language and how he uses it”.<sup>9</sup> This relationship is very relevant, because the learner’s perspective about the language may determine the purposes this language will be used for and the means to achieve them.

The term affordance comes from an ecological approach, which, according to Paiva (2009), “does not isolate the sensorial, cognitive, affective processes, because it understands all these processes in an interconnected way in the experiences the person lives in society”<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, we can understand in this passage that nobody learns the same way. Even though two students are in the same class every day, every learning process works differently to each person and they will not learn the same way, because “there are contexts that favor more opportunities to learn a second language than others.”<sup>11</sup> (Paiva, 2009). Supplementing her speech, there is also the opposite, or contexts that disadvantage or block learners’ possibilities of learning successfully, and furthermore, there is the learner himself as an individual that may surpass these contexts and consequently expose how autonomy works.

Addressing the context of language learning, we shall also remember that not all learners have the same context of affordances, so that some of them have the need not for their own affordances, but their perception as language learning propitiations. Then, I understand that there is a difference between an ESL learner and an EFL learner.

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9 “[...] é a relação do aprendiz com essa língua, ou seja, como ele percebe essa língua e como usa essa língua.” (Translated by the author)

10 “não isola os processos sensoriais, cognitivos, afetivos, pois vê todos esses processos de forma interligada nas experiências que o indivíduo vive na sociedade.” (Translated by the author)

11 “há contextos que favorecem mais oportunidades para aprendizagem de uma segunda língua do que outros.” (Translated by the author)

The first one, in one hand will be more constantly exposed to the language and will probably not feel the need to search for extra ecolinguistic environments - full of different affordances. On the other hand, as the second learner's profile who will probably have the necessity of searching for more ecolinguistic environments, if he wants to succeed on learning the language, because he does not have a free framework of affordances to be perceived.

When searching for these ecolinguistic environments, EFL learners may have the experience of interacting with different people so that they are invited to use (most of the time) English to communicate, providing an ecolinguistic environment of interaction and consequently practice of the target language. Duff and Talmy (2011), argue that

L2 socialization views language learners/users as sociohistorically, socioculturally and sociopolitically situated individuals with multiple subjectivities and identities (e.g. not only as *language learners*), which are inculcated, enacted and co-constructed through social experience in everyday life.

We may address these sociohistorical, sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives to which the individual is exposed to by concluding that the learner builds his thoughts within and based on the society around him and autonomously grows a particular perspective of understanding the world in its numerous contexts.

Moreover, it is possible to affirm that technological resources may work as part of ecolinguistics environments for autonomy as it brings these social experiences and this contact mentioned above with its multimodality of oral, written and visual stimuli.

Hence, Paiva (2009) corroborates with this perspective when she claims that “every contact with the diverse oral and written genres in diverse communicative situations will propitiate diverse interpretations, because each language learner or user is inserted in the ecosystem in a different way, perceiving, interpreting and acting individually.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, learners must be exposed to a massive amount of ecolinguistics environments – which I defended that that could be technological resources in this study – so that they will be able to absorb its affordances, by realizing them as propitiators, for their own individualities.

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12 “Cada contato com os diversos gêneros orais e escritos em situações diversas de comunicação propiciará interpretações diversas pois cada aprendiz ou usuário de uma língua se insere no ecossistema de uma forma diferente, percebendo, interpretando e agindo de forma individual.” (Translated by the author)

In addition to this idea, we can understand that the position a learner occupies in the ecosystem can constantly change, and these modifications tend to give more situated opportunities to new interpretations and actions to the language, and consequently new affordances are noticed. However, a very relevant point to mention is the importance of learner's perception and the understanding that digital tools can be used in this purpose because the absence of these two facts may cost the appropriate learning process partially or comprehensively. Addressing this viewpoint, Paiva (2009) reveals that:

[...] to learn more, [the learner] needs to leave his own ecosystem whose ecology does not have many language usage affordances and insert himself in another ecosystem, where English mediates the language social practices, propitiating practice. It is inside the dialogical nature of language that learners find the adequate affordances and not in the abstract system of rules.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to infer from this statement that digital technology can be used as a language ecosystem, and that this one contain affordances – if mediated in English and reproducing its social practices – can work effectively as a propitiating practice. In other words, if learners perceive that they can use digital resources as a means to leave an environment which is not favorable – in which an EFL student is emerged in – and get inserted in an appropriate ecosystem, they will probably learn more and in an autonomous way. Compared with what Paiva (2009) refers to as the grammar-translation method, still very common in some Brazilian regular schools, these affordances provided by digital technology mentioned above can be much more effective.

### **Teacher's Practices and Learner's Autonomy**

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13 “[...]para aprender mais, [o aprendiz] precisa sair de seu ecossistema em cuja ecologia não há muitos propiciamentos de uso da língua e se inserir em outro ecossistema, onde o inglês media as práticas sociais da linguagem, propiciando a prática. É na natureza dialógica da linguagem que o aprendiz encontra os propiciamentos adequados e não no sistema abstrato de regras.” (Translated by the author)

But do teachers' practices affect learners' autonomy? It is generally accepted by teachers that the necessity of autonomy is real to the students, but according to Nicolaidis and Fernandes (2002),

even with the premise that autonomy is, by itself, an educational goal that develops individual competences and skills not only in the learning field, but also in the personal one, it is necessary that the participants of the educational system (teachers, learners and educational politics elaborators) discuss the objectives and goals, respecting the peculiar cultural needs of the community.<sup>14</sup>

It is possible to infer then that nor the student nor the teacher is solely responsible for the learners' autonomy, but the association of many collaborators that may pay attention to respect all the cultural peculiarities of an ecolinguistics system that would affect directly the learners' perspective in an autonomous way or not, depending on the learning decisions made by the language user in the ecosystem.

Still on this topic, Leffa (2002) calls our attention to the need of reflecting on the view of teachers as controllers, preventing learners to accomplish autonomy. In his words (2002, p. 8), "there is a power structure very well defined into the traditional classroom where the teacher usually has the control."<sup>15</sup> So, teachers should step down this controller position and let learners free to make learning decisions, fact that is quite hard to a professional that has been trained his whole life to do so, being the main decision maker to tasks such as class objectives, materials to be used, and teaching strategies in an individual process.

Unfortunately the fact above can frighten teachers a lot, because most of them seem not to be ready to let learners define their goals, materials/resources, evaluation (self-assessment), their own pace or even if learning EFL is necessary to their lives or not (LEFFA, 2002). Therefore, giving up the authority in class and putting learners in the center of their

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14 Mesmo diante da premissa de que autonomia é, por si só, uma meta educacional que desenvolve as competências e habilidades do indivíduo não só no campo da aprendizagem, mas também no pessoal, é preciso que os participantes do sistema educacional (docentes, discentes e elaboradores de política educacional) discutam objetivos e metas, respeitando necessidades peculiares culturais da comunidade em questão. (translated by the author)

15 "Há uma estrutura de poder bem definida na sala de aula tradicional onde o controle normalmente é exercido pelo professor" (Translated by the author)

own learning process is also partially a teachers' responsibility, and that is why I have considered this topic so relevant to explore.

Teachers should also provide different approaches instead of considering simply a decontextualized view of language, so that learners would conceive them as “[...] a multitude of in-flux, contested, and ever changing *social practices* that in part constitute particular dynamic communities of practice” (DUFF & TALMY, 2011, p.96). These social practices highlighted by the authors are often neglected by the teachers when they do not perceive them as an ecolinguistics system, a fact that makes the class environment even more disconnected to the reality and lowers the motivation and confidence learners may have.

In one of the principles established by Tomlinson (2011, p.10) he argues that “materials should help learners to develop confidence”, but this confidence is sometimes misunderstood by teachers when they adapt the input they use so that students might understand and assimilate “easier”. These artificial and simplified materials are one example of decisions controlling teachers make that may unfortunately disguise what true language actually is and when “they [students] become aware that the process is being simplified for them and what they are doing bears little resemblance to actual language use. They also become aware that [...] their apparent success is an illusion” (Tomlinson, 2011, p.10) and finally feel frustrated, fact that once again demonstrates the importance of the teachers' decisions in class.

## **Final Remarks**

After discussing the issue of the inter-relationship of language learners with their potential digital environment, I consider some possibilities of helping students to change their perception, in order to realize other ecolinguistics environments to interact with the English language, as when teachers motivate or even propitiate strategies of interaction with the language. Another possibility is that the schools' limitations sometimes end up forcing the autonomous learner to search for new ecolinguistics environments (containing affordances

that may be perceived by himself), implying in an informal learning and in all the process that reveals itself as a possibility approached in this study.

The possibility focused in this study is the power that digital artifacts have as they contain affordances that can be used in an ecolinguistics environment, if perceived as one, to propitiate interaction and incentivize the learners to become active participants on their own learning process, consequently making them more autonomous.

Therefore, I am of the opinion that teachers must encourage learners' autonomy using a huge variety of strategies, as there are evidences that schools have limited affordances that propitiate language acquisition. In addition, learners themselves should perceive the power of digital technology and know how to use it properly so that they move from the non-propitious environment they are surrounded by to a more propitious ecosystem where they can find affordances to learn more and more efficiently respecting their cultural particularities and incorporating others.

Also, I believe that the subject of ecolinguistics should be more discussed in the universities where future English language teachers are being prepared to be professionals. His consciousness could act in favor of a valuable and important teaching that would probably bring a broader framework, despite the contributions, to the area of study and to the English teaching/learning process as a whole.

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