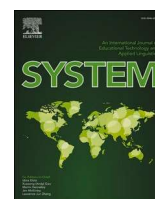


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# ‘Makes head hurt’: School-aged learners’ perceptions in the language classroom

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Language learning  
Learner perceptions  
Learner engagement  
Learner culture  
Language classroom ecology  
Repertory grid

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research study which investigates the ways in which school-based language learners perceive the classroom. Concerned with the ‘ecology’ of the classroom, the aim of the study is to take language learners’ own perceptions as a basis to understand more about the extent and types of learner engagement in the pedagogical dimension of the classroom. The study uses the repertory grid technique to collect data from lower-secondary language learners, and was chosen for the way it allows learners to speak for themselves. The data indicate that the school-based learners respond primarily with affect to classroom activities, and that behavioural, cognitive, and affective dimensions of learner engagement are not perceived as distinct categories by learners. The findings also show the development of a learner culture, where metacognitive strategies are used that allow learners to negotiate ‘being taught’ and serve purposes that diverge from the pedagogical purposes of the classroom as a space for language learning. The implications of these findings and possible teacher action in response to them are presented.

## 1. Introduction

The study presented here is about uncovering the perceptions that school-based learners have of their language classroom. There is a need to investigate how learners actually see the language classroom because although research into learners is not in short supply, the focus is often on abstract notions, such as learner autonomy (e.g., Little, 2007; Little et al., 2003), or so-called ‘latent variables’ such as learner motivation (e.g., Boo et al., 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), or for a specific pedagogic purpose such as the work on ‘good’ learner and learning strategies (e.g., Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Macaro, 2001; Oxford, 1990). These research agendas have drawn a significant amount of attention to the language learner and the classroom itself as a place of learning but they do not take learners’ own perceptions of classroom activity as their starting point, a fact that may explain why resulting innovations in language pedagogy may often have limited durability (Littlejohn, 2008a).

The current study, therefore, begins with learner perceptions and can be described as taking an ‘ecological’ approach (Tudor, 2003; van Lier, 2011) to the classroom. An ecological perspective can be defined as an appreciation of the rich nature of interaction, classroom dynamics, and the complex network of interdependent elements at a social, physical and symbolic level (van Lier, 2010). This approach to language learning research has been applied from different theoretical perspectives, such as sociocultural theory (e.g., Alanen, 2003; van Lier, 2004) and complex dynamic systems theory (e.g., Kostoulas et al., 2018; Kramsch, 2008; Larsen-Freeman,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102560>

Received 22 June 2020; Received in revised form 11 May 2021; Accepted 20 May 2021

Available online 18 June 2021

0346-251X/© 2021 Published by Elsevier Ltd.