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Innovations in English Language Education: New Issues and Trends

Edited by Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo



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ANNA ANSELMO and ELENA REFRASCHINI*

Combining SLA Theory and Teaching Practice: “Big Bowl of Serial”, or, How to Use TV Series to Become Autonomous Learners of English

Abstract

This article deals with an asynchronous, fully online English course titled “Big Bowl of Serial”, which is analysed using Leo van Lier’s ecology of language learning framework (2004). The current scholarly interest in multimodal content and its uses and potential benefits in the classroom (Pattimore/Muñoz 2023) is fertile ground for critically presenting “Big Bowl of Serial” as a case study. The article introduces, firstly, the critical description of “Big Bowl of Serial” (its learning objectives, the theory at its core, and its structure), and, secondly, the analysis of its features in the light of Leo van Lier’s ecology of language learning and its four main constructs – relation, action, perception, and quality (2004). The article is divided into different sections accordingly: after a short introduction, there follows a descriptive section concerning the structure and aims of “Big Bowl of Serial”, after which, the course is analysed using van Lier’s framework (2004); the final section of the article sums up the strengths of the course that emerge from the analysis, and identifies areas that might be further developed in the future.

Keywords: Online Language Learning (OLL), TV Series, ELT, Ecology, Ecology of Language Learning

1. Introduction and research questions

This article deals with an asynchronous, fully online English course titled “Big Bowl of Serial” (hereafter BBoS), created by travel writer, EFL teacher and EFL business owner Elena Refraschini.¹ The course is a product of the technological affordances and growing popularity of online language learning (OLL) and it aims to teach Italian learners (or any learners who are proficient in Italian) how to autonomously use TV series to improve their English. OLL has proven instrumental in delivering education during the COVID-19 pandemic; furthermore, OLL has shown the potential for both

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synchronous and asynchronous learning, which have not only deconstructed some of the traditional power dynamics in the classroom (Mann *et al.* 2022: 3), but have also presented challenges regarding appropriate teaching material, content presentation, motivation, and assessment (Suárez/El-Henawy 2023: 2). BBoS takes up these challenges and aims to involve students in “a learning process that provides learner agency, responsibility, flexibility, and choice” (Bozkurt/Sharma 2020: ii). In other words, BBoS engages with learner autonomy as contextual (Cappellini *et al.* 2017: 3). Moreover, against the backdrop of English language learning in Italy (Ajello 2018), BBoS is unique. Far from being a traditional English course offering learners input, correction, and assessment in a real or virtual classroom setting; it is, rather, a structured support for self-study, aimed at learners who already have at least pre-intermediate knowledge of English and basic awareness of their CEFR level. The aim of BBoS is thus to provide scaffolding for learners, and tips and tricks to be able to improve their English while using something they enjoy, that is, TV series, but in a way that produces real progress. The aim is to activate learner agency, responsibility, flexibility, choice, and autonomy through a minimum of necessary teacher guidance and through several adaptable activities that present learning techniques, rather than act as mere practice.

Based on these introductory remarks, the article aims to present BBoS as a case study and offer a critical introduction focussing on the following points:

- The critical description of BBoS: its learning objectives, the theory at its core, and its structure
- The analysis of the features of BBoS in the light of Leo van Lier’s ecology of language learning and its four main constructs: relation, action, perception, and quality.
- The way(s) BBoS fills a gap in the Italian EFL market and whether it shows any room for future improvement

In order to address these points, the article first presents BBoS – course structure and aims – secondly, it presents the theoretical background that informs the analysis, i.e. Leo van Lier’s ecology of language learning; thirdly, the analysis of BBoS is carried out, and, lastly, conclusions are drawn, whereby strengths emerge as well as potential areas to be developed in the future.

2. “Big Bowl of Serial”: course rationale, aims, and structure

The exponential growth in production and consumption of serialized products on TV is mirrored by the proliferation of streaming platforms, the revolution in content consumption pioneered by Netflix (Bastos *et al.* 2024: 1), and the escalating social acceptability of binge-watching (Luse *et al.* 2020; Anghelcev *et al.* 2020). The field of audiovisual streaming services has boomed in Italy during the 2010s (Balbi/Magaudda 2014). Data shows that 70% of Netflix viewing happens on TV sets, indicating that TV series consumption still happens in the living room or in the bedroom, via a TV screen (Kafka 2018). With streaming TV series becoming a favourite leisure activity, the need to capitalise on this for the purpose of English language learning has increased. Webb (2014) stated that original version TV series can provide learners with large amounts of spoken input. Moreover, some studies (De Wilde *et al.* 2021; Lindgren/Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz *et al.* 2021) state that watching L2 TV is a very popular method of engaging with a foreign language outside of the classroom. Potential beneficial consequences of watching L2 multimodal material are the object of current scholarly interest (Pattemore/Muñoz 2023); in particular, extensive viewing of TV series has been pointed out as an alternative source of authentic input, with a potential for learning due to lexical richness, repeated encounters with low-frequency words, and visual image support (Pujadas/Muñoz 2019; Rodgers 2018). And while binge-watching may be useful because of massed exposure to L2 input, scholars are also researching the advantages of spaced exposure. In particular “when the learning episodes happen in a massed manner, multiple exposures to target items become redundant, causing decline in attentional processing and, consequently, lower learning gains compared to spaced exposure” (Pattemore/Muñoz 2023: 403; Carpenter 2017) BBoS builds on the growing use of streaming platforms and the burgeoning interest in TV series to offer a methodological framework that learners can use to self-train, a framework which is adaptable enough to be applied to virtually any TV series and flexible enough to accommodate both pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate students; a framework which fosters spaced exposure and repetition of the target language in order to support acquisition.

The course is made up of ten sections. All sections contain a teacher-led component, i.e. introductory videos aimed at providing sufficient

scaffolding (Bruner/Sherwood 1976; Wood *et al.* 1976; Gonulal/Loewen 2018) by presenting rationales for each activity, by offering instructions to fruitfully carry out activities, and by establishing both teacher credentials and rapport. The teacher-led component is delivered in L1 (i.e. Italian). The reasons for this choice concern recent research in L1 use in the (virtual) classroom (Shin *et al.* 2019): according to Shin *et al.*, L1 use has been identified as a realistic choice in a learning environment, playing a valuable pedagogical role (Hall/Cook 2012), as well as requiring comprehensive conceptualisations including realistic, relational, and situational aspects (Shin *et al.* 2019: 9).

The sections in the course are here presented in order:

1. Section one is a short general introduction.
2. Section two is titled “Learning English: What Does it Mean?”.

This section is meant to give learners who have not been previously exposed to the mechanisms underpinning the learning of a second language, the right conceptual categories and terminology to understand the rationale behind the activities that they will carry out in the course. Section two contains several subsections: firstly, the teacher presents the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing – and addresses the potentially uneven proficiency in each skill as inherent in the learning process (Powers 2010); secondly, the teacher presents the notions of input and output, with particular reference to Krashen’s notion of comprehensible input (1982); thirdly, the teacher has recourse to the Learning Zone Model (Senninger 2017) and presents the comfort zone, the learning zone and the panic zone, as well as provide suggestions on how to stay in the learning zone; fourthly, some critical issues in language learning are discussed, i.e. the importance of a functional approach to learning grammar, the importance of recognizing passive and active L2 vocabulary knowledge, and the introduction of some strategies – such as spaced repetition and retrieval practice – useful in improving and monitoring self-learning. The aim of this section is to equip the learner with the necessary knowledge to undertake the improvement of second language learning by him- or herself, using dialogues and monologues from TV shows or movies.

3. Section three is titled “How TV Series Can Help in Language Learning” and explores the ways in which TV series can be employed for self-learning. TV series are fun, engaging and memorable; these qualities facilitate language learning (Webb/Rodgers 2009a; Webb/Rodgers 2009b); moreover, TV series facilitate picking up new vocabulary incidentally (Rodgers/Webb 2019); they also offer insight into both authentic interactions carried out in different communicative settings and the use of different registers and accents (Bilsborough 2009); finally, TV series can play a pivotal role in familiarizing students with a foreign culture (Larrea Espinar/Rodriguez 2019).
4. Section four deals with some of the most common misconceptions and mistakes that hinder language learning using TV series and contains practical advice on the kind of series to focus on depending on one’s CEFR level, on the use of an active approach to language learning through TV series, and on the fruitful use of tools such as subtitles. In other words, students should select what to watch based on their competence, and, consequently, pace themselves in learning. For instance, pre-intermediate learners should preferably focus on sitcoms, which provide quotidian, easily recognizable situations and settings (Bilsborough 2009), and consequently facilitate understanding. Moreover, watching should be active, i.e. it should be accompanied by tasks – pre-, while-, and after-watching tasks (Cambridge English n.d.). The use of subtitles changes according to the learner’s level: pre-intermediate learners might need to use L1 subtitles and subsequently move to English subtitles; more advanced learners (B2–C1) may only use English subtitles or prefer not to use them at all.
5. Section five contains practical information regarding: where to find clips from TV series for free, which online dictionaries to refer to should there be a need, grammar references should there be a need, and a list of websites containing TV series scripts.
6. Section six constitutes the core of the course. Here, learners are presented with 20 different activities, each named after a famous character from a TV show. The teacher briefly introduces the main rationale for the activities: using a short clip from a TV series each activity aims to facilitate practicing a specific language skill

(i.e. vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking). Activities are numbered, each contains a video introduction and illustrative slides: the teacher presents the activity and simulates the carrying out and completion of the activity for both pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate learners. Activities do not have to be carried out in any specific order. Every activity has a download section, where worksheets are provided. Learners are encouraged to work on improving their English for 15 to 20 minutes each day, using one of the activities offered and following the procedure laid out in the introductory video. The activities target different aspects of the language learning journey:

- a. Vocabulary and word-building skills: the Sheldon activity, the Walter activity, the Monica activity, the Carrie Activity
- b. Writing: the Ted activity, the Nanny activity, the Amy activity, the Rory activity, the Jack activity, the Don activity
- c. Speaking and pronunciation: the Pritchett activity, the Moira Activity, The Michael Activity, the Joe activity, the Philip activity, the Dre activity, the Elliot activity
- d. Listening comprehension: the Molly activity
- e. Grammar: the Lisa Activity
- f. Collocations: the Elanor and Chidi Activity

Many of the activities contain integrated skills tasks: the Moira activity, for example, requires students to read the script from a scene, identify terms they believe may be hard to pronounce, and then watch the scene to find out the correct pronunciation.

7. After dealing with the appropriate techniques to harness the comprehensible input offered by TV series, section seven gives learners useful study techniques, aimed at practicing, assimilating, actively using the language learned. Here, various common teaching tools are shared, such as flashcards and memory games (the templates for which are available to download and personalize).
8. The last sections (eight to ten) contain follow up information, a short feedback questionnaire and the opportunity to request a live online session with Elena Refraschini. The contents of the session can be requested and agreed upon with the teacher herself.

3. Theoretical background

The present article takes its cue from Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning (2004). In particular, two of van Lier's foundational concepts are drawn on: firstly, his notion of ecological linguistics, that is, a linguistics which "focuses on language as relations between people and the world, and on language learning as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world" (van Lier 2004: 4); secondly, his definition of ecology in the closing words of his monograph:

Ecology is presented here as a way of thinking about teaching and learning that should be applicable in all situations, and as a way of working that takes the engaged and active learner as a starting point. [...] It is just a way of thinking about teaching and learning in all its complexity, a way of looking at language as a tool of many uses, and as a key component of all human meaning-making activity. It envisions classrooms as busy workshops with lots of activity and learners who have things they want to accomplish, and who, with the help of teachers, fellow learners, and other sources of assistance, find the tools they need to achieve their goals. (van Lier 2004: 224)

Within this framework, ecology is articulated into four main categories: perception, action, relation, and quality (van Lier 2004). In terms of perception, learners are active explorers and all their senses are engaged in the facilitation of meaning (van Lier 2004). Action is required in the learning process: "learners must act to gather the linguistic information they need by doing the activities (e.g., projects and tasks) structured in the curriculum with scaffolding provided by the teacher." (Mei *et al.* 2022: 234). Relation concerns language learning as identity formation, in so far as learners respond to new stimuli and a new culture in the new language; consequently, their ability to relate to the stimuli and the host community (e.g. their teacher and peers) is conducive to learning. From an ecology of language learning perspective, the quality of education should not be assessed through standardized testing; quality manifests through engagement with the learning process and the learning environment (van Lier 2004). Agency is the core element interacting with perception, action, relation and quality. A passive learner will not learn; successful learning depends more on learner initiative than merely on input: "agency is closely connected to identity, and this emphasises the social and dialogical

side of agency: it depends not only on the individual, but also on the environment” (van Lier 2010: 5). Language learning is an area of activity and the classroom is a community of practice (van Lier 2004).

In this ecosystem, learners are autonomous, i.e. they are allowed to define the meaning of their own acts within their social context (van Lier 2004). Within an ecosystem, including any social ecosystem (a family, a classroom, a school – see Bronfenbrenner 1996) a large number of influences are present in a partially chaotic, unpredictable and uncontrolled way. Yet, somehow, among all the movement and interaction, a social system and a complex order emerge. This order, which is dynamic rather than static, provides affordances for active participants in the setting and learning emerges as part of affordances being picked up and exploited for further action. This view of situated learning is quite different from the assumptions of scientific research in which every input has an output and every effect has an identifiable cause preceding it. (van Lier 2004: 8) Such a holistic approach is useful in analysing some of the strengths of BBoS, in particular the course’s emphasis on learner agency, engagement, and autonomy.

4. “Big Bowl of Serial” and van Lier’s ecology of language learning

Recently, van Lier’s perspective has been applied to online learning settings (Liu/Chao 2017; Mei *et al.* 2022). The present section aims to apply van Lier’s insight to BBoS, a fully online course, which, while containing asynchronous teacher-led components, is, in fact, aimed at boosting structured self-study and self-learning opportunities and providing methodology for growth in learner autonomy. There is, therefore, no classroom setting, even though learners can request an end-course session with Elena Refraschini. Van Lier’s ecology of language learning is used here as it is a versatile and adaptable construct, useful in analysing language learning opportunities that stray from conventional classroom-based, teacher-led learning environments, insofar as learning ecosystems can exist outside the classroom and the situatedness of learning and learner agency can be supported via online and digital tools, while teacher scaffolding can be easily provided in online learning settings.

In BBoS, scaffolding is provided in two main ways: firstly, section two offers a concise – albeit perforce simplistic – guide to some notions in second/foreign

language acquisition. Stephen Krashen's ground-breaking theories, currently lying at the basis of some popular English courses (Wall Street English n.d.), are offered learners as an emancipating tool: the notion of comprehensible input, for instance, can be influential in debunking the idea that uncritical exposure to the second/foreign language equates learning. While exposure is instrumental and facilitates incidental language learning (Schmitt/Schmitt 2020), it must be graded and complemented by achievable tasks. Familiarizing students with Krashen's well-known ($i+1$) hypothesis – “we acquire by understanding language that contains a structure a bit beyond our current level of competence” (Krashen 1982; Lichtman/VanPatten 2021) – is meant to offer BBoS students realistic expectations: TV series need to be accessible based on the learner's current language competence (i.e. watching *Peaky Blinders*¹ as a B1 student may result in considerable frustration); also, TV series cannot be used as comprehensible input in their entirety, but in order to carry out structured tasks that might facilitate learning and improve knowledge of the second language short excerpts from an episode should be identified. The use of Krashen's notion of comprehensible input is aimed at empowering learners by sharing learning techniques, so that students may eventually become their own teachers.

The second way in which Refraschini provides scaffolding for learners is through the 20 activities in BBoS: not only are the activities thoroughly presented and exemplified, but these are built in such a way as to produce awareness in the learners as to the processes of language learning. The Walter activity (see Appendix 1), for instance, teaches learners how to create their personal word clouds. By watching a short excerpt from *Breaking Bad* (season 1, episode 1), learners select a keyword and then build a set of semantic associations around it, learning new words or new acceptations for each word, in the process. Learners are further asked to write example sentences for each new word they added to their word cloud. This is a structured procedure learners can use to expand their vocabulary and fruitfully employ an online dictionary to do so. In addition, Refraschini suggests using NAmE Dictionaries (e.g., <https://www.merriam-webster.com>), because she aims to teach the NAmE variety of English, which is her unique selling point in the Italian English-learning market.

¹ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2442560/> for more information on *Peaky Blinders*. [Last accessed 10 December 2024].

Besides providing scaffolding, Refraschini's BBoS engages van Lier's four components of an ecological approach to language learning:

1. Perception. BBoS is conceived to engage the learners' senses: sight and hearing are involved in watching teacher-led components as well as clips from TV series. Touch is also involved – interaction with the course is dependent on a device and on the use of a keyboard and mouse pad; it also implies the use of pen and paper as activities are provided in the shape of downloadable and printable worksheets.

2. Action. Action and agency are pivotal to BBoS as the course is built around the notion of learner autonomy: "Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (see Little 1991: 4); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes" (Holec 1981: 3; see Benson 2007; Smith 2008). While in BBoS students may not be actively responsible for correction and assessment, and may not select their methods and techniques, they are actively responsible for setting their learning objectives, choosing contents (the activities in BBoS are applicable to any series of the learner's choosing), setting pace, time, and place for their learning (activities can be carried 24/7 in any location as long as a wireless connection is available), identifying stages for their learning (e.g. more challenging activities may be left for a different time, while more realistically achievable activities may be carried out straight away; BBoS does not arrange activities in order of difficulty).

Relation. In BBoS relation is embodied as language use that builds, maintains, and expands connections at a physical, social, and symbolic levels (van Lier 2010). Learners develop awareness of their learning processes. Moreover, they interact with serialized TV products whose language is the learning objective. Actively watching TV series, learners are incidentally exposed to varieties of the language they are learning, new vocabulary, new lexicogrammar, they are exposed to spoken interaction that strongly resembles authentic language use, to cultural elements and habits which can socialize them into the culture of the second/foreign language. Cultural and sociolinguistic elements in BBoS are particularly relevant in reshaping learners' identities as they interact with North American culture

and language varieties. BBoS thus produces multi-layered interactions with one's own learning – fostering awareness as well as autonomy – and cultural products in the second/foreign language. These elements can be fed back into the course itself if the learners wish to come full circle and interact with their teacher through an online session. Lastly, interaction is repeatedly fostered by the teacher in terms of online social media engagement: Refraschini runs a website (www.ingleseamericano.it) and an Instagram profile (@ingleseamericano.it) and she urges learners to share their learning experience on Instagram or to reach her via direct messages (DMs) to discuss feedback and address any questions or doubts they may have.

Quality. In van Lier's ecology of learning framework, quality can be assessed through appreciation of learner experience and well-being. In 2022, Mei *et al.* had recourse to learner questionnaires in order to identify learner views of the learning experience. In the case of BBoS, a learner questionnaire is provided at the very end, but only contains six general questions: "was section 2 (SLA theory) useful to you?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "was section 2 (SLA theory) clearly explained?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "were activities (sections 6 and 7) clearly explained?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "would you improve anything in the course?" (open question); "leave your feedback here (this will not be published)" (open question); "write a review of the course for my website and let me know if you wish to remain anonymous" (open question). The questionnaire is both a way to enhance relation and a way of better understanding learner experience and quality.

5. Critical conclusion and future developments

The analysis of BBoS in this article sees many strengths and some room for improvement. Van Lier's ecology of language learning framework proves particularly useful, in this respect, as its four main constructs identify defining dynamics in learning ecosystems and, therefore, highlight potential areas that require attention. BBoS addresses B1 to C2 learners who show awareness of their language level and can correctly self-assess; it addresses learners who are passionate about serialized TV products beyond the language learning process; it addresses learners who do not necessarily desire to commit to a synchronous online course or an in-person course, but, due to time/work/lifestyle constraints prefer to be in charge of their own

learning in terms of time, place, pace, staging, and contents. Refraschini provides ample scaffolding for learners in BBoS, by introducing some basic notions of SLA theory into the syllabus, so that learners can manage their own expectations as well as learning, and by offering structured yet versatile activities for students to carry out, as exemplified by her. Student agency is thus supported and stimulated by these guidelines for self-learning and autonomy. Learners' ability to develop a relational identity as they interact with course content is also fostered; in fact, the course offers primarily cultural content, which is further sociolinguistically marked. That way, learners are exposed to both culture and varieties of NAmE, which interacts with their identity-making through the second/foreign language. Agency is worked into BBoS thanks to the technology that facilitates OLL: technology combines with the online learning environment offered by BBoS to create specific affordances for learning – whereby affordances are understood as situated in the relationship between users and environment (Jitpaisarnwattana *et al.* 2022). According to van Lier, affordances are relationships between learners and the environment that support a potential or awareness of actions towards their learning goals (2010, 2004). "In other words, the educational affordance of an online learning environment is available and perceived by learners, allowing them to take further actions and accomplish their goals." (Jitpaisarnwattana *et al.* 2022: 4)

BBoS is a remarkable tool as it stands, but there is room for improvement should one plan for a 2.0 version. Suggested developments that might improve the course's ecosystem are as follows: firstly, using L1 (Italian) as the main language of the course serves the purpose of making the course more inclusive in marketing terms, but in terms of the learning environment, designing two separate courses (pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate) and offering graded versions in the L2 to support both groups of learners might improve relation and agency and might facilitate emerging language patterns. Relation might further be supported by creating an online community – through a dedicated IG profile, for instance – and helping learners interact and establish peer-to-peer relationships as well as fostering teacher-learner rapport. Relation can also be facilitated by incorporating asynchronous learning into a synchronous online environment to foster interpersonal communication (Mei *et al.* 2022: 231). Lastly, quality might be best investigated by devising an improved feedback section in the course: in

particular, the learner questionnaire should be more detailed and questions more specific as to perceived learner success, learner well-being and learner experience, with direct reference to both theoretical sections (in particular section two) and the practice section (six).

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