THE IDEAS IN THIS MONOGRAPH ARE BUILT UPON THE VARIOUS ‘TURNS’ IN APPLIED linguistics in recent years. The field has expanded its understandings of what language itself is and how learning happens to include social, sociocultural, sociocognitive, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and most recently, post-human analyses of human meaning making. These paradigm shifts have been especially fruitful in research investigating the process of learning a new language by adolescents and adults. Although many researchers have succeeded in moving away from the limiting epistemologies of structuralist accounts, this has presented new problems of methodology in empirical research, and of theory-to-practice connections in educational settings. A perusal of recent applied linguistics scholarship, as well as the programs of scholarly conferences in the United States and many other countries, bears this out. The articles and volume chapters, panels, research strands, and discussions in conference corridors now routinely regard language as well as language learning as complex dynamic systems, or at least as much more than merely the learners’ developing interlanguage or form–meaning mappings, though these remain crucial elements and objects of inquiry. For those concerned with language education, this work reflects an ongoing project to expand and deepen the targets and intended outcomes of instruction beyond transactional communication and bundles of skills, though to my knowledge few have framed this project in terms of human capabilities (cf. Crosbie, 2014). Researchers and other sorts of language professionals are also concerned with engaging learners’ and teachers’ creativity in countless ways, and with fostering both social justice and human compassion through language education, though this latter category has admittedly remained implicit if not subliminal across the board. My hope is that the ideas presented in this monograph enable the theory-to-practice endeavor and make some aspects of language pedagogy more central to what language learners do inside and outside of classrooms.

In my discussions with colleagues about the pedagogical approach presented in this monograph, some commented that the van-Lierian onion analogy brought up in the introduction may not be the most appropriate one to account for the dynamic interrelationships among systemic complexity, human capabilities, creativity, conflict transformation, and compassion, because it does not necessarily show the ways those nested levels interact with and interdepend on one another. An onion, after all, appears to be fairly static. This may be true if we are talking about an onion on your kitchen counter, but quite different if it is still in the ground, where the plant itself would be considered a biological complex, dynamic system in interaction with other systems. The layers of an onion are, in fact, modified leaves, the nature of which is the result first of evolutionary adaptations to the environment and later human-manipulated mutations, so as to be domesticated for cultivation and human consumption. So, even though the main point of my use of van Lier’s analogy was to illustrate the nested, interdependent nature of the pedagogical system I wanted to describe in this monograph, this broader description of the living onion in the contexts both of the world’s ecosystems and human social and economic systems make it a particularly apt simile. It means that a complex, dynamic account of what happens in language classrooms is dependent on an expanded consideration of the aims of language education in terms of human capabilities; that human capabilities can be facilitated in large measure by creativity; that creative thinking is essential for orienting language pedagogy toward social justice and conflict transformation; that these other four require consideration of human compassion made feasible in the educational setting of the language classroom; that all of these are in complex interaction with one another; and that the entire system is interconnected and interdependent with other complex systems.

Agricultural or culinary analogies aside, the concepts and categories of a human ecological language pedagogy are intended to frame what teachers and learners do in language classrooms as fundamentally and profoundly connected to both the subjective experiences and histories of learners and to other spheres of our globalized, multifaceted, richly multilingual world, a world characterized by complex types of physical, social, cultural, linguistic, and digital mobilities. Pedagogies of the CLT era have sometimes oriented toward these other spheres and these mobilities, and in some ways have succeeded at it.
For example, many of the descriptors of the CEFR as well as the ACTFL Standards imply a social and sociocultural focus (e.g., the ACTFL Communities standard or the more recent treatments of mediation in the CEFR; North & Piccardo, 2017). Yet I would argue that many aspects of contemporary pedagogies are built around the (primarily linguistic) development of the individual learner, without necessarily considering the learner to be first and foremost an emergent member of what Lave and Wenger (1991) described as a community of practice, with the community in question being in fact multiple and intricate (see also Wenger, 1998). For the language learner, not just the community of practice of the classroom is of relevance, but also of the society in which the learner is learning a new language and the society in which the learners’ new language is used. Lave and Wenger also put forth the idea of the learner as a “legitimate peripheral participant” in a new community of practice. This does not imply that there is such a thing as an ‘illegitimate’ peripheral participant, rather that a learner as newcomer is a bona fide and important—or legitimate—part of the community. The learner is also peripheral in Lave and Wenger’s understanding, simply because she or he is still gaining knowledge needed to participate in the community of practice in question; peripheral in this sense is neither a value judgment nor a political statement about the learner. While the authors acknowledged there may be no such thing as ‘central’ participation, the concept of the legitimate peripheral participant is a way to understand the place of the learner relative to members of the community who possess a larger body of knowledge about or greater abilities in a given activity. The five main topics presented in this monograph—complexity, capabilities, creativity, conflict transformation, and compassion—allow for a simultaneous focus on the individual learner as well as the learner in the social and cultural ecology of which the learner is already an integral and legitimate part by virtue of learning a new language.

In the introduction I proposed that a human ecological approach could serve as a corrective to some of the ‘damage’ of globalization that Spivak (2013) identified in her critical treatment of education in the era of globalization, as a means of countering the persistence of neoliberal trends that have also impacted language education. This may have been an overly idealistic and possibly unrealistic assertion, even if I am not alone in having taken up the challenge to address some of the limitations and shortcomings of language education today. In this regard, one may assert that my ideas suggest a sort of kumbaya-ism applicable to students who are ready, willing, and able to do the kinds of things that visionary educators would like them to do (David Block, personal communication, 9 April 2019). The chapters here appear to apply mostly in the middle-class world of education with sufficient resources, whereas the vast majority of the educational contexts around the world have relatively few resources. While it is certainly true that in my own teaching and professional experiences I have been fortunate to work with abundant resources and with learners who are for the most part ready, willing, and able to do what we would like them to do, I hope I have been able to show that the tenets of a human ecological pedagogy are intended as a means of thinking about and designing curriculum with the diverse contingencies of local context in sharp focus. I began the book by observing that any teaching, whether by a teacher or on one’s own, is always guided by a ‘pedagogy’ based on a set of assumptions or beliefs about the nature of language and language learning. In these chapters, I have hopefully shown how a human ecological language pedagogy can be applied even in settings with limited resources or with learners who may appear less than ready, willing, and able to do what the pedagogical approach presented here implies.

The human ecological language pedagogy described here hopefully also can serve as a corrective to ubiquitous modernist pedagogies that predominate in classrooms around the world. These pedagogies tend to be based on limited or limiting framings of language itself as a bounded set of discrete items to be acquired, language learning as a linear process from no knowledge to some approximation of native-speaker norms, and classroom activity as practice in terms of largely transactional communication about things not necessarily of interest or importance to learners or relevant to the world beyond the classroom.

The last word of this monograph goes to Leo van Lier. In the closing pages of his 2004 book he wrote:

An ecological approach sees the learner as a whole person, not a grammar production unit. This involves having meaningful things to say, being taken seriously, being given responsibility, and being encouraged to tackle challenging projects, to think critically, and to take control of one’s own learning. (p. 223)

This declaration is a red thread through all of Leo’s work, as well as of this monograph, and has inspired and guided me in my own career as I struggled to gain an understanding of the complexities of language classrooms and the messy realities of language learners’ experiences during their study abroad sojourns. Most recently I have turned my attention to language learners who are newcomers to Germany, some who came as refugees and some as what you might call more conventional immigrants, all
endeavoring to learn the language and cultural norms of their new home. In experiencing the multilingual ecology of these classrooms, I have observed pedagogical practices that align with many of the ideas in this monograph, even if the teachers might not explicitly describe their pedagogies in these ways. The teachers of many Willkommensklassen [Welcome Classes] are clearly teaching beyond mere competences and skills, toward promoting human capabilities; they are fostering creativity in and through the learners’ new language, and in their aim to help these learners both ‘integrate’ into German society and also find their own voice in that society, are centrally concerned with pursuing social justice and both showing and fostering compassion. But it is exactly this variable level of explicitness with which I was concerned in this monograph, because many researchers and teachers of the young 21st century do seem attuned to a human ecological approach. This human ecological language pedagogy will hopefully serve, then, as a means of making those multifarious interconnections and dense interrelationships more explicit, in realizing the full potential of language learning and teaching in our age.