

- *“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”* –Nelson Mandela

As an only child to two working-class parents, I developed myriad ways of entertaining myself, a favorite of which involved educating a stuffed dog and several homemade Care Bears on the art of long division. When I was not actively working as a student, I served as a teacher to stuffed animals, to members of my Girl Scout Troop, and to subscribers of my self-styled newsletter, “Pens & Friends.” Indeed, few people would doubt the passion with which I approach learning and teaching. Despite this dedication, I worked my way through grade school and even the first three years of university without having studied seriously another language. Thankfully, I enrolled in an introductory Spanish course during my penultimate semester of college, which sparked a love of language learning equal to my affection for teaching. Now, more than a decade since my first teaching experience in Guatemala, I no longer consider myself a novice language teacher. Nevertheless, my challenge in this position statement is to uncover and to express clearly those theories and hypotheses of second language acquisition that most accurately support my current teaching practices.

Language as a Social Phenomenon

First, I view language as primarily a social phenomenon, through which both proficient and non-proficient speakers of a language establish their identity as well as strengthen or cause detriment to interpersonal relationships. Gee (2005) identifies two primary functions of human language, including “to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions” (p. 1). If language is indeed intricately connected to the social and cultural contexts from which it emerges, then it would seem counterintuitive to separate the learning of a second or third language from an environment that fosters meaningful interaction among learners.

Language as Form, Meaning, and Use

Identifying the components of language can also be facilitative for language learners and teachers. Van Lier (2004) claims that “language cannot be ‘boiled down’ to grammar or meaning only, and it cannot be ‘quarantined,’ or separated from the totality of ways of communicating and making sense of the world we use” (p. 24). For this reason, I find Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) nonhierarchical conceptualization of the parts of language particularly compelling. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) identify three dimensions of language: form; meaning; and use, each of which may interact with and/or influence the other two. The forms of a language include sounds, signs, written symbols, inflectional morphemes, function words, and syntactic structures. The second dimension, meaning, consists primarily of words, derivational morphemes, and multiword lexical units, though semantics essentially deals with the “dictionary” meaning of lexemes out of context. The third dimension, use, incorporates the social situation in which language is produced, and the purpose of communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In my experience as a language learner and teacher, it is often this final dimension of language that receives comparably less instructional time, in spite of the fact that utilizing a structure appropriately may be a learner’s greatest challenge in mastering a foreign language.

As a novice English teacher in Guatemala with minimal pedagogical training, I resorted to an overall emphasis on forms, and worksheets emerged as a main staple of my grammar classes. I had a particularly difficult time teaching the present perfect because although I knew how to explain proper construction of the form to the class, I was ignorant as to its use. For example, I could not explain why one might choose the present perfect over the simple past or vice versa. Thus, I left my students to complete attractive looking worksheets, which required them to insert the present perfect at designated points within sentences. Larsen-Freeman (2003)

asserts that “in order to arrive at a complete understanding of any one of the [dimensions], it must be described from all three perspectives” (p. 36). Therefore, in my current teaching practice, I explain or encourage learners to investigate *why* a particular form is used over another, and I provide opportunities for learners actually to *use* the structure. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) propose that “what ESL/EFL teachers should be helping students do is *be able to use* the structures of English accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately” (p. 6).

Language Learning

Given that language is embedded in the everyday interactions of human beings, a logical follow-up to this understanding would be a position on language learning that incorporates the intimate interpersonal and contextual aspects of the process. Sociocultural Theory (SCT), with its origins situated in Vygotsky’s work on child development, offers a theory of language acquisition that views the learner as an active being who ought not to be separated from her environment. One of the fundamental considerations of SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), originally defined by Vygotsky (1978) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Therefore, the notion of ZPD suggests that knowledge is acquired and transformed as a result of participation in meaningful interaction, an assumption that necessitates the presence of more than one individual. I find that utilizing ZPD to account for second language learning is entirely appropriate, as language acquisition does not often take place in isolation. In addition, it is important to note that Vygotsky’s original conceptualization of ZPD has been expanded in recent years to hypothesize that learning may also emerge as a result of learner—learner interaction (Chaiklin, 2003). In other words, two or more learners may

interact in the target language without the assistance of a teacher or a more capable peer, and in turn, meaningfully contribute to one another's progress in acquiring a second language.

If I take a moment to visualize one of my ninth-grade EFL classrooms at a private school in Guatemala, I can make out the faces of more than forty-five students crammed into desks packed so tightly together that it was physically impossible for the teacher to make her way to the back of the room. While I quickly grew frustrated with the classroom set-up due to my inability to converse with learners beyond the third row, I have come to realize that my students may not necessarily *need* to interact with me in order to learn English. As van Lier (2004) asserts, "taking the classroom as our ecosystem...the expert-novice context is not the only, or not even the primary participation structure available" (p. 156). In fact, van Lier and Matsuo (2000) identify several benefits of interaction between non-native speakers of similar proficiency levels, including the attainment of "a degree of symmetry that is similar to that of a conversation between native speakers" (van Lier & Matsuo, 2000, p. 283).

In my opinion, interaction is essential for language learning, whether the interlocutors are non-native speakers of similar or differing proficiency levels, or native speakers and non-native speakers. Ohta (2000) affirms that "language acquisition is realized through a collaborative process whereby learners appropriate the language of the interaction as their own, for their own purposes, building grammatical, expressive, and cultural competence through this process" (p. 51). When I reflect on fruitful periods in my acquisition of Spanish, I recognize that opportunities for sustained interaction with non-native speaking peers increased my comfort level with the language. Therefore, I recognize that information-exchange tasks have an important role in language learning. Particularly in foreign language contexts, where opportunities to use the target language in real-world settings are relatively rare, the careful

preparation and construction of *true tasks* on the part of the foreign language teacher may provide learners with opportunities and purposes for interacting with their peers. A true task is defined by Skehan (1998, as cited in Fotos, 2002) as an activity in which:

- meaning is primary;
- there is a communication problem of some type to solve;
- the activity has some relationship to real-world activities;
- task completion is usually required; and
- task performance can be assessed in terms of the outcome (p. 140).

True tasks, which require the participation of all learners and address the unique interests of each group, will likely enable learners to develop their social selves as well as raise their awareness of facets of the target language. Brown (2001) also states that “a variety of techniques in your lessons will at least partially ensure that you will ‘reach’ a maximum number of students” (p. 60). In other words, not just the tasks themselves, but a variety in purpose will engender a wider interest base among the learners.

Not only is second language acquisition a possible outcome of meaningful communication with speakers of the target language, but the language learning process is also cognitive in nature. Atkinson (2002) describes the sociocognitive approach to SLA as “...a view of language and language acquisition as simultaneously occurring and interactively constructed both ‘in the head’ and ‘in the world’” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 525). Just as interlocutors form an integral part of the acquisition process, so too do the cognitive resources of learners serve an essential role in the learners’ progression in the target language. For a learner who is actively involved in the acquisition of a second or third language, the context in which she uses the language works in tandem with her cognitive knowledge. Atkinson explains further that acts of

cognition "...do not start in the head, although the head is certainly involved, nor do they end in the head, because the output is social action" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 531). Learners are social beings, and as a result, interaction among learners is largely facilitative of language learning. At the same time, the acquisition process occurs at the level of cognition, and consequently is difficult to observe. Yet "...because of the intimate connection between thought and language resulting from language's function as a mediator of human cognition, interaction provides a window into developmental processes" (Ohta, 2000, p. 54).

Learners' spoken language may shed light on where they are developmentally. Furthermore, a teacher's awareness of students' progress will subsequently allow her to make informed instructional decisions that cater to the needs of each unique group of learners. One vehicle for observing learner progression or regression is an analysis of the variation present in a learner's *interlanguage*, defined by Selinker (1972) as the systematic linguistic behavior of learners of a second language (L2), which includes imperfect reflections of some norm. Free variation, which involves the random use of different target forms, is a precursor to systematic variation, "when two or more sounds/grammatical forms vary contextually" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 223) or to fossilization, the permanent cessation of learning. Thus, free variation is merely the initial step in a learner's progress towards acquisition of the second language.

To round out a discussion of language learning, it would be important to consider the effect of individual differences on the acquisition process, particularly learner motivation. In his influential 1967 article, Corder states that "*given motivation*, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data" (p. 164). However, the concept of motivation is incredibly complex, especially as there is a lack of concordance on how to measure this widely discussed phenomenon. As a starting point for understanding these

complexities, McGroarty (1996) offers an overview of early work completed on the measurement of attitude and motivation. The two most influential individuals in the field were Gardner and Lambert, who began their investigations into attitudes and motivation through the distribution of Likert-scale questionnaires containing statements about the L2, the L2 community, and reasons for studying the L2. Based on their studies, Gardner and Lambert developed the orientation index (McGroarty, 1996) that identified the types of motivation that were associated with successful language learning. The index distinguished between intrinsic motivation, or determination that arises from within, and extrinsic motivation, which is based on an individual's desire to receive some type of external reward. Stemming from these initial distinctions, Gardner and Lambert introduced two popular motivational constructs: integrative motivation (a desire to integrate into the target language community) and instrumental (reward-based) motivation.

Whereas a high level of motivation may positively influence second language acquisition, Lightbown and Spada (2000) assert that although successful learners are often highly motivated, it is difficult to determine causality. In other words, "it is plausible that early success heightened [the students'] motivation, or that both success and motivation are due to their special aptitude for language learning or the favorable context in which they are learning" (Lightbown & Spada, 2000, p. 56). In light of past research on motivation, I concur with McGroarty (1996) that any new theory of L2 motivation should also take into account the context of the interaction, the relationship between participants and the learners' level of anxiety, which may then assist language teachers in strategically encouraging their learners to persevere, particularly in the foreign language context.

As a result, I find MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels' (1998) conceptualization of *Willingness to Communicate* (WTC) particularly enlightening. Through a pyramid comprising six layers, MacIntyre et al (1998) present a holistic perspective on motivation through an explanation of how a number of communicative, social and psychological variables may have an impact on a person's desire to communicate in a L2. The bottom three layers include variables that represent stable, more enduring properties of the environment or person, and the top three layers include variables that are dependent on the context of the communicative act. While a language teacher may have limited influence over the bottom layer of the pyramid, including a learner's personality and the intergroup climate (e.g. the linguistic vitality of the L1 and L2, prevailing positive or negative attitudes towards certain ethnic groups, the presence of intergroup tension and the parents' attitudes towards the L2 community), a language teacher may have a substantial impact on a learner's confidence in communicating with a specific person in a specific context. Although I have at times felt powerless in encouraging a learner to communicate in the target language when she clearly did not wish to do so for any number of possible reasons, I find it valuable to remember that an individual's willingness to communicate is both intricately connected to her identity and largely dependent on the communicative context.

The Teaching of Grammar

I have grown to embrace grammar instruction as a part of my language teaching practice, although I often prefer an inductive approach in order to move away from the traditional PPP (Present-Practice-Produce) model. Instead of placing learners in a passive role as recipients of knowledge, I encourage learners to be both the center of the lessons and the responsible parties as they come to their own conclusions regarding grammar rules based on samples of input provided to them. Ellis (2002) asserts that this sort of discovery-based approach "is potentially

more motivating than simply being told a grammatical rule and...it can encourage students to form and test hypotheses about the grammar of the L2..." (pp. 164—65). My intermediate Spanish students had a wonderful time participating in an inductive lesson in which we used an authentic phone conversation between a husband and wife as the basis for identifying various uses of the verbs *ser* and *estar*, the Spanish equivalents of *be*. Not only was the conversation humorous, but as a group, the learners came up with a more comprehensive list of the differences between the two verbs than that provided by the textbook. Larsen-Freeman (2003) asserts that "grammar is never boring. What we ask students to do to learn it can be" (p.21). Therefore, in practice, I view it as a particular challenge to incorporate grammar into fun, communicative activities, through which learners will have the opportunity to use the structure and to further their language development. Particularly in foreign language settings, grammar instruction may not only accelerate the learner's progression in the target language, but "grammar learning and acquisition can enhance learner proficiency and accuracy and facilitate the internalization of its syntactic system, thus supplementing the development of fluency" (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002, p. 10).

Use of the Learners' L1

Kumaravadivelu (2003) states that the "first language is perhaps the most useful and the least-used resource students bring to the L2 classroom" (p. 250). Although the language classroom may be the only opportunity students have to hear and speak the target language, if the learners have a common L1, strategic use of this language on the part of the instructor may add an intangible affective component to the classroom environment and may also provide clarity as to expectations for an activity or for an assignment, which will then allow the learners to concentrate on their use of the target language. For example, during my practicum teaching at North Salinas High in an English Language Development class, I occasionally used my

knowledge of Spanish to provide the native Spanish-speaking students with a quick translation of difficult English vocabulary words and to explain lengthy instructions on an individual, as-needed basis

Lesson Planning

When I first started planning English language lessons for the staff of a non-governmental organization in Spain, I employed rather chaotic methods for collecting materials, designing activities, and choosing topics for discussion. I did not know where to begin, nor did I have a repertoire of engaging activities and tasks that I readily could have adapted to align with the course content and learner population. Although my classes at the NGO were not disastrous by any means, I am now to a great extent more systematic and enthusiastic about lesson planning.

At the same time, I do not consider the act of designing or of participating in a language lesson to be a static process. Prabhu (1992) explains that “the foremost need, if classroom activity is not to be just a performance of routines, is for teachers’ own beliefs and intuitions to become more accessible to them and more actively engaged as one of the forces in the dynamics of the classroom” (p. 237). As evidence of my commitment to continue to discover more in regard to language, language learning, and language teaching, in the fall of 2007, I kept a diary documenting my experience in a beginning Italian course at a local community college. One of the major themes that emerged from an analysis of the diary was my dissatisfaction with the instructor’s use of the class period. The extended amount of time we spent on tasks that were neither interesting nor helpful for my learning of Italian reminded me that as a teacher, I ought to place a high value on my students’ time, which I can demonstrate to them through the effective use of the brief moments we spend together each week. Thus, I try to create smooth transitions

between tasks by conscientiously planning how to provide directions for each new activity. Instead of speeding through directions, I have found that spending time at the beginning of a task avoids confusion, and increases academic learning time. For instance, a visual prompt such as a PowerPoint or numbered instructions on the board might serve to minimize the students' need for repetition. Cangelosi (2000) affirms that "the more senses (such as seeing and hearing) that a teacher uses to communicate directions, the more likely students are to understand them" (p. 250). If a teacher spends even two additional minutes modeling the activity or asking a student to rephrase the instructions, she is likely to save time later. Another way to smooth transitions between tasks is for the teacher to state the overall nature of the task, organize the students into groups and then, once everyone is prepared, give complete instructions (Wajnryb, 1992). I have seen that this sequence contributes to the cohesion of an activity, reducing students' anxiety surrounding their role in the task.

Assessment

Assessment is an important, and often expected, part of language teaching; however, neither students nor teachers ought to dread its practice. In fact, "the test development process promotes more integrated, effective instruction" (Turner, 1997, p. 187), which in turn benefits all individuals involved in the educational system. There are a variety of ways to assess learners' proficiency in a foreign or second language that go beyond the traditional, and possibly over-used, multiple choice format. For instance, a teacher could employ short answer prompts, graduated dictations, dictocomps, role plays, oral interviews, manipulation of sentence strips, and/or free response essays depending on the construct(s) the teacher aims to assess, and the purpose(s) for assessing them. In my opinion, it would be wise to incorporate several test methods throughout the duration of a course both to capitalize on individual learner strengths and

to maximize the correspondence between the ability being tested and the way in which the ability is assessed.

In addition to the aforementioned test methods, two types of alternative assessment that I find particularly appealing are portfolios and self-evaluations. According to Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991), “a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas” (p. 60). Although portfolios are challenging as the process requires a significant time investment on the part of the teacher and learners, Schafer (1993, as cited in Bailey, 1998) proposes that portfolios help a learner to see “all the positive growth that is taking place during the learning process, thus enhancing her/his self-esteem and nurturing further growth” (p. 216).

In conjunction with the use of portfolios, I try to incorporate self-assessment in my language courses. Although critics of self-assessment have questioned the accuracy with which learners can evaluate their progress, I find that the process is motivating and also promotes involvement in course material. In reference to Brindley (1988), Bailey (1998) affirms that self-assessment “is consistent with a trend in language education in general—that of more emphasis on learner responsibility and learner-centered curricula” (p. 227). Particularly in the assessment of writing, self-evaluation can be a powerful tool because it affords learners the opportunity to assess their degree of mastery over the assignment’s objectives. I am also interested in using my students’ self-evaluations to focus my teaching on areas in which the learners feel that they are weak and to adjust my methods of preparing students for successful completion of pedagogic and real-world tasks.

To wrap up my thoughts on language assessment, I will discuss briefly my views on the assessment of writing and the importance of visual stimuli. I am of the opinion that much of the

work involved in assessing writing happens before the instrument or task is distributed, including the creation of a good prompt and the design of an effective scoring rubric. Weigle (2000) proposes that “a writing prompt must allow enough flexibility that test takers of different abilities and backgrounds can find a point of entry into it and have something to say” (p. 90). Therefore, a teacher ought to think carefully about the nature of the responses her students would be able to provide before administering an assessment of writing. In addition, in spite of the plethora of scoring rubrics available to teachers of writing, since each task is different, a teacher should ensure that her rubric accurately reflects the criteria she intends to measure. On a final note, I aim to incorporate significant visual support irrespective of the skill being assessed. Brindley (1998) asserts that providing adequate visual support enables learners “to activate their content schemata and to assist them in making predictions and inferences when a text has only been partially understood” (p. 180). Visual stimuli are another way to *bias for best* (Swain, 1984) and to focus the learners’ attention on the content of the material instead of on the linguistic aspects of the task.

Learning a second language is likely one of the most difficult things a human being can accomplish. The complex processes underlying the acquisition of an entirely new way of communicating with and about the world entail a metamorphosis of one’s identity as well as a widening of one’s understanding of humanity and the world. In my position as a language teacher, I assume the responsibility of furthering my knowledge as to how second languages are acquired, and how I can assist in that process.

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