

A Socio-cognitive Approach to English
Language Learning

Social Research

Applied to

English Language

Teaching in Colombian Contexts:

Theory and Methods

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Introduction

*A Socio-cognitive Approach to
English Language Learning*

A b o u t t h e E d i t o r / A u t h o r

Wilder Yesid Escobar Alméciga was born in Cundinamarca, Colombia and holds a B. A. in business administration from Simpson University, California and a master's degree in applied linguistics to TEFL from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá. His work experience includes teaching at all levels from elementary school, to postgraduate courses in both the United States of America and in Colombia. He is currently working as an assistant professor for the undergraduate Bilingual Education Program at Universidad El Bosque leading the research processes on Bilingual Education. His research publications address social issues through discourse analysis in English as a foreign language teaching and learning. For the last two years, he has been a member of the research group Educación Universitaria Unbosque.

A Socio-cognitive Approach to English Language Learning

Language Learning is a Social Practice

Traditionally, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been erroneously associated with mechanical procedures and misunderstood as a standardized practice which is homogeneously exercised in the language classroom (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Escobar & Gómez, 2010; Guerrero, 2008). However, Parodi (2005) demonstrates that language is always transforming and being transformed by social environments, drawing significant correlations between linguistic systems and social dynamics. In the same way, this work attempts to present social research projects applied to English language teaching practices, and highlight their contribution to the understanding of English learning as a social process which must be informed by its immediate and diverse social contexts.

On the one hand, Sapir (1970) makes a remarkable contribution to the conceptualization of language as a nonstandard, ever-evolving social phenomenon in which he moves from systemic explanations to cultural and identity-related descriptions of its characteristics. Initially, he introduces language as a system characterized by a structural organization that carries autonomous meaning. The fact that its written form has a predetermined fundamental direction from left to right and from top to bottom gives priority to its components, words, and concepts which follow a preestablished order. Furthermore, Sapir suggests that such preestablished order is culturally bound, i.e. that not all societies have identical language organization. In direct opposition to English writing, Hebrew, for example, organizes ideas from right to left and from top to bottom. In the same way, traditional Japanese text is written in columns from top to bottom and from right to left with

16 | its first pages opposite of that which characterizes our writing system. To demonstrate the structural differences which characterize language, chapter one presents a theory-based analysis of the verb patterns of English and Spanish, specifically addressing motion event conflation in verb- and satellite-framed languages. Finally, after examining the influence that individuals exert on language production, the author attests that the social context, indeed, merits further investigation to determine its role in language acquisition and use.

Similarly, Fairclough (2003) examines the adverse and asymmetrical social conditions, e.g. exclusion, power, dominance, and control, which can be generated through the use of language in social practices such as speaking and writing. Through his research, Fairclough seeks to promote a social awareness that may potentially result in significant changes of such conditions. Since social research is concerned with “watching [...] people live their lives, asking people about their experiences, and using words to tell others’ stories” (Tisdale, 2004, p. 13), chapters two and three of this text rely on social research to similarly explore the lives of students and understand their realities, raise awareness, and motivate change in the rigid social structures which disrupt knowledge constructions, marginalize individuals, and perpetuate unbalanced relations of power. To elaborate upon this concept, chapter two presents an ethnographic case study designed to unveil interactional dynamics among students from a class composed of 29 main-stream and six special-education students under the inclusion act in education. Subsequently, the case study discussed in chapter three seeks to analyze specific power relationships among teenagers, and proposes an effective approach to teaching based on emotional empowerment.

Essentially, there are two general misconceptions about knowledge. First, it is often perceived as a static rather than a dynamic entity. However, knowledge evolves through a dynamic social process, changing and being changed by individuals, groups, and contexts. Thus, knowledge presents new opportunities and challenges which require not only to be recognized, but to be comprehended, so as to be able to react and cope with the speed of such change (Gale, 1996). Having a static vision of knowledge could translate into implementing standardized teaching procedures which ignore contextual information. As a result, these teaching procedures may fail to identify our own shortcomings and strengths, thereby limiting our capacity for intellectual growth.

The second misconception of knowledge is that its components often exist in isolation rather than as an interdependent and systemic network of functional constituents. Learning which focuses on isolated facts learned out of context disregards the complex

interaction between learner and knowledge. In this way, consideration for the learner's self-conception is often overlooked and, as such, may hinder learning. To directly address this misconception, chapter three is devoted to developing a clear association between the emotional self and the learning process describing the emotional factors that could potentially limit student learning and performance in a foreign language. Undoubtedly, facts in and of themselves prove inadequate unless they are taught in consideration of the emotional and cognitive realities of the students.

Moreover, Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008) suggest that language is closely and directly linked to identity. They illustrate it as the sharing of historical, cultural, and socio-linguistic backgrounds that bind individuals or groups together. Such backgrounds concurrently embody the differences that allow us to be dissimilar to other individuals or groups. For example, the similarities that Mexicans share among themselves and which tie them together as a socio-political community are also the aspects that set them apart from other cultures. Individual, as well as social identities are constructed and expressed in many different ways: religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, dialects and accents (Block, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Foucault, 1988; Lister, 2006). As such, chapter four presents an ethnographic analysis of English language teaching practices in light of the learners' socio-cultural backgrounds and contexts in order to modify a foreign-language teaching model which considers the social and learning needs of the students.

Furthermore, language has been suggested to mediate cognitive processes at both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (Well, 1995). The interpersonal level refers to the verbal interaction that takes place among two or more people, and which shapes and constructs knowledge in the learning context. At the intrapersonal level, speaking to oneself helps to simplify information, thus facilitating the process of understanding and knowledge construction. Nevertheless, both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication are considered social activities. When an individual speaks to himself or herself, the opinions of others bear greatly on the mind. Subsequently, when speaking with others, one's opinions are being built or modified by the interactions in which they take part. Thus, the role of language in the cognitive process is understood as a social aspect given that there is, at least, a two-way conduit of influence operating in the learning of individuals. Consideration of these two-way interactions is essential when attempting to establish the relationships between the language-learning process and the social environments in which it occurs.

Furthermore, language creates the conditions for learning and for social relations to take place. Norton (1997) suggests that language serves to express perceptions of the world; that it is through language that values, desires, and knowledge are conveyed. Language, therefore, is an expression of identity; it is the reflection of people's ideologies, as well as a manner in which people convey meaning and pass on knowledge. Furthermore, it is suggested that language is not only a means through which individuals express identity, but it is also a source through which identity is constructed. Language is an element capable of positioning individuals in a given social rank. Thus, language is both a source for identity constitution and the means by which one expresses that identity (Cameron, 1995, as cited in Pennycook, 2001). For this reason, chapter five represents an attempt to create safe learning environments that would nurture the self-confidence of young learners to enhance and express their understandings about their social world through narrative writing.

In light of the above, Hymes (1974) refers to two main characteristics that any approach to language should consider. The first consideration suggests that "one needs to investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situation, so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity and abstract them into some other frame of reference" (p.39). Language is not standard and it is not static; it varies depending on the context and its appropriateness is determined by the end results, such as achieving communication in a specific context and for a specific purpose. The second characteristic suggests that "one must take as context a community or network of persons, investigating its communicative activities as a whole, so that any use of channel and code takes its place as part of the resources upon which the members draw" (p. 39). In the realm of education and, more especially English teaching, there are particular conventions such as words, styles, genre, and social events which are to be analyzed in light of the surrounding settings, so as to give them a proper reading.

Understanding the relationships of knowledge, language, teaching, and learning could initiate the basis for recognizing EFL teaching as an opportunity for knowledge construction. This, in turn, could motivate reconsiderations about teaching policies and practices at the classroom level, as well as at the policy-making level. In other words, this work represents a proponent of a continuum of a 'renewal of understandings.' At a personal level, this collection of social research aided a reconsideration of methodology as to inspire teaching practices which better relate them to our own realities. At the collective level, the social research processes and experiences come together in a unified

text in order to share new understandings. These understandings become, in turn, available to others for the advancement of the socio-cultural English learning conditions in the heterogeneous EFL classrooms in the Colombian context.

McKay and Wong (1996) suggest that learners are extremely complex social beings with ever-changing needs and desires. They inhabit complex, multidimensional social environments in which uneven power relations are exerted through various forms of discourse. School life entails far more than the apparent academic responsibilities. It also entails negotiating channels of power between the different entities of their social setting, as well as meeting the demands of parents, teachers and administrators, all while struggling for success in learning. Therefore, learning is a particularly intricate socio-cognitive endeavor affected by multiple factors which need to be taken into account when trying to create the conditions for it to prosper. Frequently, this meeting of demands is done without a personal or individual reflection, nor the due individual or collective appropriation process.

Apart from the notion of identity and language, but not extraneous to them, are the countless other concepts that are at the core of learning and teaching such as investment, agency, and discourse. Investment, as described by Norton (1997), “is the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target [object of study] and the sometimes ambivalent desire to learn it” (p. 19). Knowing which relationships between the learner and the English language are being motivated and promoted will help us to understand socio-cultural concerns. This idea used to be referred to as ‘motivation;’ however, much questioning about the term led to a relabeling of it as ‘investment.’ This individual-knowledge relationship can be influenced by how students perceive the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it. The way in which an individual sees the target language can trigger an acceptance or resistance towards that language and culture or worse, a resistance to their own language and culture. Unconditionally adopting information from others without the proper analytical process leads to the replication of facts and not one’s own appropriation and construction of knowledge.

Agency refers to the effort of positioning oneself in a favorable place in society. As such, “in any discourse, knowledge, social relations, and social identities are simultaneously being constituted” (Fairclough, 1992, as cited in McKay & Wong, 1996, p. 591). Subject positioning in society is achieved through discourse and this sheds light on the learning process in the sense that the learners’ performance is contingent to the position they occupy within their particular social group. What is our position in relation-

ship to the language we are learning? How do we perceive ourselves, our own language, our own being in relationship to the ones we want to understand? Are we positioning ourselves in a favorable place when teaching and learning English? Whose interests do we perpetuate? What messages do we convey? What values do the stakeholders of education promote? In other words, the perception that a student may have regarding his or her upbringing can and will be influenced by the way they present someone else's.

Evidently, learning English not only entails the learning of the linguistic code, but comprehending a different approach to life in relation to one's own. An individual may take it as given—not questioning it whatsoever—or he or she may carry out an appropriation process which involves understanding the aspects of that approach. In this manner, the individual may be able to identify which aspects may be accepted and which must be rejected. By identifying interests and affiliations in the teaching and learning of English in the Colombian context, we can discern the existence or absence of collective goals as individual groups or as a nation. Beyond trying to reach accuracy and fluency as Tudor (2001) suggests, teaching and learning should seek a purposeful appropriation process of knowledge in which teachers and institutions consider social issues to favor the collective development of the individual or nation. This may mean favoring the learning and understanding of the collective values, objectives, and approaches to life over the content of the language itself.

In conclusion, the aforementioned attributes of knowledge, language, and learning posit that the teaching of English as a foreign language as a socio-cognitive process which must incessantly question social factors for its planning and implementation. The forthcoming chapters are practical examples presenting theory and methods which profoundly study processes of culturally-mediated verb patterns, social dynamics, emotional barriers, socio-cultural backgrounds, and social sensitivity in regards to English language teaching and learning in the Colombian context.

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