

Social Values of Second Language Acquisition Research

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This forum is dedicated to the discussion on the social values of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and is motivated by talks organized in the Fall of 2018 by Columbia University, Teachers College [Center for International Foreign Language Teacher Education \(CIFLTE\)](#): two talks by Professor Weiguo Zhang of Shandong University and a talk by Professor Lourdes Ortega of Georgetown University. Historically, SLA research has investigated the linguistic and cognitive phenomena of language transfer, staged developments, and systematicity and variability of the learner's interlanguage. Such inquiry has led to empirical studies that explored the role of one's internal mechanisms (both language-specific and cognitive), the role of the mother tongue, the role of psychological variables and lastly, the role of the second language (L2) learner's social and environmental factors. Due to the field's reliance on drawing inspiration from psycholinguistic traditions, the latter factors of social and environmental influences had typically received little limelight within the SLA community. However, this trend is starting to change as the discussion on the meaning and the significance of social values in language research is beginning to take shape among SLA scholars. A representative case in point is the talks delivered by Professor Zhang and Professor Ortega that highlighted, albeit from different disciplinary perspectives, a shift in perspective on social values in SLA research. This forum will review the role of social values in SLA research as discussed in these talks and consider the role of critical pedagogy in further exploring social values in the field.

The first talk in this series was given by Dr. Weiguo Zhang, professor of economics at the Center for Economic Research and the director of Center for Language and Economic Research at Shandong University. At first glance, Professor Zhang's background in economics might seem unusual for a talk in applied linguistics. Yet, the intersection of these two disciplines showed that linguistics and economics are far from being independent of each other. Professor Zhang spoke about the importance of language in international trade and its associated outcomes by examining the economic effects of first and second languages. Given the role of English as the most spoken L2 in the world and its importance in global communications, Dr. Zhang highlighted the facilitative effect of English as lingua franca (ELF) on the trade flow between China and other OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in his talk titled "The Trade Effect of English as a Lingua Franca." The language barrier between nations has often been documented as a source of reduction in international trade: It is more difficult for nations with different languages to negotiate a trade than it is for nations which share the same language or at least similar dialects. By exploring the role of English as a lingua franca of international trade, Dr. Zhang showed that, when nations used English to promote trade, they were able to overcome the language barrier by communicating in a "third," shared language, i.e., ELF. Specifically, this type of trade communication had a greater influence on service trade than on goods trade. Furthermore, regardless of the type of trade, ELF appeared to have a greater influence on import than on export. Interestingly, it was shown that ELF's influence on the trade between China and non-English-speaking countries was more significant than on that between China and English-speaking countries (Zhang, 2018a). This showed that English was not

necessarily being used to target business transactions with English-speaking countries; rather, it was being used for trade negotiations between nations whose language barriers had precluded such deals in the past. Overall, it was undeniable that English played a role of mediator between nations with traditionally disparate language backgrounds and that it facilitated international commerce in general.

In his second talk, “Linguistic Distance, Language Learners’ Mother Tongue, and Chinese Acquisition: An Empirical Study from the Perspective of Language Economics,” Dr.



*Image 1: Dr. Zhang delivering a talk on Linguistic Distance, Language Learners’ Mother Tongue, and Chinese Acquisition
Courtesy of CIFLTE*

Zhang spoke about the importance of the mother tongue in the acquisition of Chinese as a second language. In the study of language economics, linguistic distances have been shown to affect economic outcomes such as trade and earnings. Dr. Zhang analyzed the influence of language learners’ mother tongues on Chinese acquisition as a second language based on the notion of linguistic distance often studied in language economics. His findings showed that there was a statistically significant negative correlation between linguistic distance and Chinese acquisition. A smaller linguistic distance between Chinese and a learner’s first language often correlated with the learner’s higher Chinese proficiency. Based on these

results, Professor Zhang discussed the policy implications of studying linguistic distance on China’s minority bilingual education, teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and the dissemination of Chinese in the world (Zhang, 2018b). Taken together, the two talks by Dr. Zhang point out that English as a second language (ESL) happens to be the global lingua franca that has geopolitical and economic implications that operate well beyond the walls of the ESL classrooms. One important takeaway from these talks was that languages do not exist in a vacuum, devoid of societal or political situations; rather they exist as an integral part of the global community in which they have values. In this particular case, these were economic values of global proportions.

Although the letter “S” in SLA technically stands for “second,” the field is by no means limited to second language acquisition alone. The world is fast becoming multilingual and there are myriads of interconnected influences amongst multiple languages that make up the stakeholders of SLA research at all levels of participation. Recognizing that the increased exposure to the multilingual world means a more transdisciplinary framework, the Douglas Fir Group (2016) called for reorienting SLA research to consider ideological as well as socio-cultural and multifaceted natures of L2 learning and teaching. Heeding the call, Professor Lourdes Ortega’s talk “Addressing Social Justice in the Study of L2 Learning” highlighted the importance of social values in SLA research within the multilingual context. Specifically, the social value of SLA that she wanted to address was the issues of social justice in the studies of L2 learning. Embracing such an apt and fitting topic in today’s turbulent time of political and societal upheaval, Dr. Ortega reminded the audience that many multilinguals today are members of the marginalized and minoritized language communities (Ortega, 2018). Perhaps scholarly SLA work had been negligent in identifying these issues because, as a common practice, the method of convenient sampling in SLA research within the academic milieu has led to an unbalanced representation of participants far removed from contemporary social issues. In light

of this, Dr. Ortega's talk was an important reminder that multilingualism is grassroots and not only elite, and that multilingual abilities are gradient, fuzzy, and probabilistic in their development, given that L2 learning is situated within the society at large and interpersonal in nature. For these reasons, SLA research has a social responsibility for the L2 learner who is often positioned in marginalized roles. SLA research should be able to provide pedagogy that empowers those in a multilingual community who are oppressed, faced with prejudices, and yet required to use language in most diverse and open ways in order to communicate and function as productive members of the dominant language community. One goal of SLA research then is to illuminate issues of social justice and transform them for the betterment of the L2 learners and multilinguals situated in various learning contexts (Ortega, 2018).



*Image 2: Dr. Ortega delivering a talk on Addressing Social Justice in the Study of L2 Learning
Courtesy of CIFLTE*

What then are some possible avenues in this regard for the future of SLA research and practice in the classroom? The critical pedagogy approach and its applications in the L2 classroom may be able to inspire a meaningful discussion on social values in SLA research. Bearing in mind the talks presented here, the most fitting educational framework in which matters of social values can have transformative effects for the oppressed L2 learner seems to be the critical pedagogy approach. Professor Ortega's talk on social justice and advancing empowerment and ending oppression for the marginalized language groups is reminiscent of the educational philosophy advocated by the likes of Henry Giroux (e.g., 2001) and Paulo Freire (e.g., 2000). Professor Zhang's talks on economics of language are also relevant to this perspective, seeing how language economics can contribute to analyses of language policy, expression of symbolic power and status, and economic (dis)advantage and (in)equality. Critical pedagogy in short views teaching as a political act, knowledge as non-neutral, and issues of social justice and democracy as integral to learning and teaching in the classroom (McLaren & Crawford, 2010). It is fundamentally committed to social transformation for the collective good and to empowering culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised learners through a problem-posing dialectical perspective that allows them to acquire, analyze, and produce both social and self-knowledge (McLaren & Crawford, 2010). As previously mentioned, SLA research that takes a stand on social issues of economic disenfranchisement or cultural oppression on issues of race and identity are few and far between. One such rare study that I would like to highlight in closing is Chun's (2016) "Addressing Racialized Multicultural Discourses in an EAP Textbook: Working Toward a Critical Pedagogies Approach."

Chun's (2016) study was motivated by the emergence of racialized multicultural discourse in the ESL classroom through textbook representations of immigrant success stories. As Chun states, although racialized discourse in language classrooms might have good intentions of promoting acceptance, tolerance, and harmony, curriculum materials and classroom interactions feature power dynamics in which questions of who is constructing and deciding racialized identities and who is being defined reflect inequitable institutional arrangements. Chun, therefore, wanted to explore whether it is only the text and/or the teacher that has the authority to define and decide racialized roles or whether the students also have a voice in the

matter. His argument for espousing the critical approach to language pedagogy was that there is a hegemony of lexical and grammatical choices in meaning-making that represents a dominant view of the world. By developing academic literacy skills through close engagement with curriculum materials that feature dominant cultural, racialized, and politicized representations of immigrants, English-language learners can become better equipped to use language in creating their own identities.

In an 11-month ethnographic study of an English for academic purposes class, Chun (2016) examined how a teacher and his students addressed and engaged with racialized multicultural discourses represented in the class textbook. Specifically, Chun examined how the instructor's shift from a more traditional to a more critical pedagogy shaped students' engagement with the text's racialized discourse. He showed that the students initially often gave one-word replies in their examination of the text, such as "Asian," "Canadian," or "Chinese," framing cultural identities in a static way that limited further discussion. As a result, students were prevented from extending their dialogue on culture, race, community, and identity. However, after the instructor's shift to a more critical pedagogic approach, the students were able to provide more complex responses and create understanding and meaning through questions and dialogue by addressing the reading material's representations of race and culture. The new approach had empowered the students to be more active and critical readers of text. Instead of viewing the text as an authority, they were able to see it as a selective version of the world. Overall, Chun's study showed a promising change in the participants' view of cultural identities. It was also an excellent example of how social values are inexorably tied to something seemingly innocuous and neutral as an EAP textbook. Unfortunately, studies like this, which illuminate issues of social values, are still fairly uncommon in SLA literature and more in the future are needed.

As SLA researchers and practitioners, the assistance and the guidance we give to our students are not always limited to linguistic properties of language but also touch on the social aspects of the language environment. Certainly, the social values of SLA research are many, and the field of SLA is ripe for more discussions on this important issue. Identifying social issues in SLA and the extent to which SLA has a role to play in this regard are possible and vital questions to be pondered in future studies.

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