

## Using Situated Learning to Examine the Language of Teaching and Learning

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Since Firth and Wagner's (1997) call for a reconceptualization of the field of second language acquisition (SLA), much discussion has centered on the pairing of discourse analysis and sociocultural theory as an approach to SLA research. Many researchers have used conversation analysis (CA) to examine language learning contexts, and of the many arms of sociocultural theory, *situated learning* has emerged as particularly suitable for the study of talk-in-interaction, the focus of CA. For discourse analysts working from a sociocultural perspective, context is integral to understanding the nature of teaching and learning, and situated learning thus represents a theory worth consideration.

The concept of situated learning clearly belongs under the umbrella of sociocultural theory, a theoretical perspective where context is believed to deeply affect learning processes. Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (2004) see situated learning as positing that "learning is rooted in the learner's participation in social practice and continuous adaptation to the unfolding circumstances and activities that constitute talk-in-interaction" (p. 501). This conceptualization of learning clearly stands in stark contrast to prevailing views in cognitivist SLA literature, which mostly regard context as a static variable, if at all. Many researchers take issue with this stance, and Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (2004) are no exception. They argue that social context is not simply one of several background variables against which learning takes place, but that it is "an integral part of cognitive development itself" (p. 501). In this way, we can argue that it is not enough to simply acknowledge that learning takes place in context; with situated learning, the context is seen as *shaping* cognitive development (i.e., learning). There is no dispute that cognitive processes underlie much of SLA, but sociocultural theories like situated learning argue that these are not the only processes worth examining.

Young and Miller (2004) see situated learning as one of a number of theories that have attempted to "bridge the epistemological divide between language and context" (p. 520) including William Labov's work with linguistic forms and sociolinguistic context, Irving Goffman and John Gumperz's sociologically-based work, and recent work on co-construction, communicative practice, and interactional competence. They define interactional competence as "participants' knowledge of how to configure...resources in a specific practice" (p. 520). The concept of interactional competence builds on elements of CA and ethnography, both of which see "language and context as mutually constitutive" (p. 520).

Recent applications of situated learning have often used CA methods of data collection and analysis in concert with a sociocultural perspective on learning. The link between situated learning and CA is laid out by Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (2004) when they argue that "both of these frameworks converge in insisting on the central role of contextually embedded communicative processes in the accomplishment of human actions and identities" (p. 504). More specifically, they state that "learning is situated in learners' social, and therefore profoundly interactional, practices" (p. 501). Young and Miller (2004) similarly conclude that the theory of learning that best addresses interactional competence is situated learning.

This focus on the effects of interaction on learning can be seen in the increase of second language research being undertaken on discourse, whether classroom-based or in other settings. In my own research, the focus on unsolicited student participation is informed by the sociocultural tenet that learning begins externally and then moves inward. Because learning moves from the interpersonal plane to the intrapersonal plane, I argue that unsolicited student participation can offer us glimpses into a student's development. By examining change in participation patterns in teacher-fronted activities over time, I have attempted to trace the incremental developmental *events* described by Vygotsky (1978). I found that the unsolicited participation by the ESL students evolved over the course of the semester, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the data collected during week three of the course, only one instance of unsolicited participation was found. Two instances of unsolicited participation were found in week four, showing a small increase. In week seven however, eight instances of unsolicited participation were found. In addition, it was visually clear from the transcripts that the excerpts of student-initiated talk became longer over time.

The extended nature of the interactions found toward the end of the semester also speaks to the qualitative difference in unsolicited student participation over time. In the beginning of the semester, the student-initiated talk concerned usage of a particular lexical item, a topic that can be seen as procedural and language-focused. In the middle of the semester, both excerpts identified involved students engaging in more meaning-focused talk (e.g., volunteering opinions or personal anecdotes) which requires longer exchanges for the teacher than answering a language-focused question. In addition, in at least one exchange from the end of the semester, it appeared that the students were interacting meaningfully with each other during the whole group activity.

Although I have not made claims about whether such change demonstrates learning, other researchers utilizing situated learning as their framework (e.g., Young & Miller, 2004) argue that change in participation patterns over time shows the learner moving from "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to fuller participation. Young and Miller (2004) argue that this move demonstrates the acquisition of interactional competence, even if only with respect to one interactional practice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) allow that cognitive processes are integral to the learning process, and that any theory of learning needs to take them into account. They argue that situated learning

appears to be a transitory concept, a bridge, between a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics. (p. 34)

It can be seen as a bridge because there is an acceptance of the cognitive processes so central to mainstream SLA claims, but there is also an acknowledgement that acquisition of some linguistic feature requires not only that it has been learned, but that it can be transported across contexts appropriately. This last point requires that researchers examine the concept of interactional competence, since proof of acquisition will lie in proper deployment or receipt of linguistic items. Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (2004) posit that "language learning is rooted in learners' participation in organizing talk-in-interaction, structuring participation frameworks, configuring discourse tasks, interactionally defining identities, and becoming competent members of the community" (p. 504). Examining interactions in the detail provided by CA allows us to see this process.

## REFERENCES

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