

# The Social Turn in SLA: An Analysis of the Cognitive and Socio-Cultural Dimensions of L2 Learners' Interactions\*

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## ABSTRACT

The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) addresses the importance of social context in language development. Building upon this theoretical strand, this small-scale research examines the dyadic interaction of university Mexican learners of English in a problem-solving task through a socio-cultural model of analysis. The interactional analysis of learner performance revealed that, along with linguistic attention, ideology, identity and affective scaffolding arose during the information exchange. In line with claims from the socio-cultural strand of SLA, we argue that these features created interactional conditions that allowed for successful communication in the target language and task completion.

## INTRODUCTION

The field of SLA was, for nearly two decades, dominated by a cognitivist perspective, examining the mental

processes that underpin the acquisition of the target linguistic system. This perspective envisaged the human mind as the only place where L2 learning occurs. Furthermore, it established a clear-cut division between the “cognitive-internal” and the “social-external” of SLA (Ortega, 2009, p. 55). By the mid-nineties however, some SLA researchers (e.g., Lantolf, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997) began to claim that the cognitivist approach idealized the L2 learner as a person whose concern was primarily to attain a native-like competence in the target language (Firth & Wagner, 1997 cited in Swain & Deters, 2007). This approach, however, failed to examine the learner, as a context-bound entity, who actively participates in social and cultural exchanges, assumes identities and manifests ideologies and emotions in social interaction. Consequently, an increasing interest in exploring the social dimension of L2 learning and its impact on language acquisition and use prompted a reconceptualization of theories and methods among theorists (e.g.

Block, 1996; Lantolf, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997). This SLA reconceptualization has been referred to as the “Social Turn in SLA” (Block, 2003, as cited in Ortega, 2009, p. 216). Overall, the Social Turn aims at understanding L2 learning through a social perspective (Ortega, 2009), building upon theoretical stands such as the Socio-Cultural Theory by Vygotsky (1987), the Constructivist Theory (Kant, 1946; Dewey, 1938, 1980), the Identity Theory (Pierce, 1995) and the Affect Theory (Lawler & Thye, 1999) among others.

The Socio-Cultural Theory envisages L2 acquisition as a dialectic process where one more capable participant provides assistance to a less capable participant to develop skills; that is language skills that are likely to be internalized moving from an interpersonal to an intrapersonal plane (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The Constructivist Theory claims that individuals create their own realities heavily relying on personal experiences (Kant, 1946; Dewey, 1938, 1980 as cited in Firth

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*Catsonite*, de la exposición "Artistas universitarios".

& Wagner, 2007). The Identity Theory adds that individuals assume roles in interaction and that successful L2 learning depends on the construction of such identities as a requisite to membership of a language community (Pierce, 1995). The Affect Theory considers that emotions produced in interaction allow for an understanding of how and when social exchanges promote or inhibit solidarity in relations or groups (Lawler & Thye, 1999 cited in Lawler, 2001, p. 322).

## METHOD

While the socio-cultural theories previously indicated differ in some respects, they highlight the importance of looking at the L2 learning

process considering a socio-cultural dimension in order to understand the elements that come into play in language interactions. In order to document the manner in which linguistic and socio-cultural variables co-occur in L2 dyad interaction, the upcoming sections describe a small-scale descriptive study conducted with university learners of English as a Foreign Language. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), descriptive studies allow us to explore language-learning phenomena that occur without researcher intrusion. Building upon these tenants, the objective of this small-scale study was to examine linguistic, social, cultural, and affective elements of learner-learner interaction arising during a meaning-based task implemented to foster L2 use.

## CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted at the *División Académica de Educación y Artes*, where English is taught as a core subject in the BA in Modern Languages. The participants were four Spanish L1 students from urban and rural areas whose ages range from 20-25 years. In light of their EFL course syllabus, participants were somewhere in the A2-B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

## INTERACTIONAL TASK

A collaborative problem-solving task was chosen for this research. According to Donato (1994), Swain (1997), Swain and Lapkin (2001), Roschelle and Teasley, (1995) problem-solving tasks are likely to bring about cognitive and social features co-occurring during L2 interaction (cited in Gáñez, 2008). That is, through a problem-solving task, learners engage in language-mediated social activities while using language as a mediational tool.

The task was designed for dyadic interaction, where dyads needed 1. to propose three solutions to the traffic problem in an area of their city, 2. evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of their solutions, and 3. select the cheapest most innovative, most environmentally friendly and best solution to put forward to their local government. This task was taken and adapted from the BBC Learning English website. A pilot version of the task revealed that learners' contributions tended to be rather limited in length and creativity. Therefore, in the final version of the task, participants were strongly encouraged to elaborate on their opinions and display creativity prior to task execution. The task developed in two stages. The first stage entailed the development of aims 1 through 3 in dyads. The second stage entailed the

integration of a single team with the four students selecting the best solution. At the end, there was a small intentional teacher-researcher's intervention as a wrap-up for the discussion. The task was implemented in a classroom where no other students were admitted not to inhibit learner performance and outcomes. Task completion was video-recorded.

#### DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

A qualitative approach to the analysis of learner interaction in the video-recordings was used. The model of the interactional analysis is rooted in tenants of the Socio-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1987), the Constructivist Theory (Kant, 1946; Dewey, 1938, 1980), the Identity Theory (Pierce, 1995) and the Affect Theory (Lawler & Thye, 1999). The model first looked at the linguistic dimension of the interaction through the identification of Language Related Episodes (LRE). Swain and Lapkin (1995) define LREs as "any part of the dialogue where learners talk about the language they are producing, questions their language use, or correct themselves or others" (cited in Gánem, 2008, p. 126). The model also looked at the socio-cultural dimension of the interaction through a description of learners' contributions to the task topic that revealed how they perceived that reality as conditioned by social and cultural factors (ideology); the role participants assumed in the interaction (identity); and expressions of positive or negative emotions (affect).

#### RESULTS

The analysis of the 16.8 minutes of task completion provided instances of LREs, ideology, identity, and affect. Due to the qualitative approach of the analysis, frequency counts of these instances were beyond the scope of the analysis. Instead, excerpts

illustrating each feature are provided to support the discussion and conclusion.

An example of LREs (Swain & Lapkin, 1995 as cited in Gánem, 2008) was evidently found in File C, Turn 2:

Miguel: What solution...what solution have you thought?

Karla: Well I, we think about the bicycles because we care the ambient...

Miroslava: Environment.

Karla: Environment, sorry (smiles and bows her head). And is better because we do it exercise and I don't know. I think. What do you think? (looking at Adriana).

This excerpt illustrates Miroslava's linguistic contribution to the interaction, offering a correction of Karla's lexical error when she misused the word *ambient* instead of *environment*. This interactional episode seems to have created language improvement conditions (Vygotsky, 1987 as cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In order to confirm this, during the wrap-up section of the task, the teacher prompted the use of the word *environment* for which Karla had been previously corrected. Karla was able to remember and use the word in the appropriate context (File C, Turn 24 and 25).

Teacher: Karla, why for the world? It's a good solution for the world.

Karla: Because we care the environment for that reason because in this time we don't have trees and for that reason is important.

An instance of how an individual's ideology is influenced by personal experiences was found in File A. Turns 14 through 23:

Miguel: Yes. Other disadvantage maybe is the...the sun (laughing) because...and I don't know...

Miroslava: Yes (also laughs and makes a facial expression of disgust)

Miguel: ... the one p.m. is very hot in Villahermosa (laughing).

Miroslava: (Makes a facial expression of disgust) is like ten and...

Miguel: Yeah (laughing)

Miroslava: six...

Miguel: Yeah, so hot.

Miroslava: Afternoon. It's so hot... so violent I don't know...it feels so... horrible (they both laugh)...but...

Miguel: And if you are going to...at your work...in bicycle and two p.m. (they both make a face of disgust) juts think about.

Miroslava: You are so sweat... and so tired...and so angry too (they both laugh).

Taking a Constructivist Perspective (Kant, 1946; Dewey, 1938, 1980 as cited in Firth & Wagner, 2007), it can be assumed that both, Miroslava and Miguel, have constructed different ideologies on traffic and heat in their cities from their personal experience as their body language, and conversational ease in this episode reveals. Miroslava's facial expression reveals a strong disagreement whereas Miguel's laughter called for a counter-acting stand.

An instance of how learner identity manifests in dyadic interaction is observed in File A, Turns 2 through 5:

Miguel: I have the same problem because when I come to university... the excessive traffic is in the avenue principal (moving his finger as pointing to the avenue).

Miroslava: Ruiz Cortines?

Miguel: No, yes! And Ramon Mendoza.

Miroslava: Oh!

Miguel assumes Miroslava is a "city local" who is knowledgeable of city places and makes reference to a "supposedly" shared avenue information by moving his finger and pointing at the avenue as if Miroslava knew what city area he meant.

Even though she had previously portrayed herself in the role more of a “city outsider” in File A, Turn 1, as the excerpt below illustrates. Nonetheless, pushed by Miguel’s co-constructed identity, Miroslava changed her city-outsider role into that of a “city local” and co-constructed meaning for successful task completion through the establishment of community identities.

Miroslava: Well... I’m not from Villahermosa but when I travel to here I have problems in the (pointing at the classroom window appealing for help)... in the park of... Carrizal... bridge. I think it’s a big problem... with traffic excessive. And I don’t know what do you think?

An example of how learner’s feelings (affect) have an effect on social interactions was found in File B, Turns 19 through 23.

Karla: Maybe drive... drive be careful... but it’s the same because is a lot of traffic and I don’t know, what do you think?

Adriana: (laughs nervously) I don’t have the...

Karla: You don’t have any idea (they both smile). What... the cheapest alternative is bicycle.

Adriana: It’s... (nods her head) it’s a good idea.

Karla: Yes but the cost of the bicycles is two thousand maybe I think because I had a project the last semester and I check the cost is two thousand.

Adriana’s linguistic performance during task completion showed proficiency flaws and this issue seemed to lead to feelings or anxiety, nervousness and frustration. There was a point when Adriana showed complete blockage responding to Karla’s questions. However, Karla showed herself supportive of Adriana’s inability to communicate meaning prompting her or providing Adriana with ideas. This shows that

Karla’s sensitivity and empathy towards Adriana promoted solidarity that helped them move the conversation forward.

#### DISCUSSION

In line with social theorists (Vygotsky, 1987; Kant, 1946; Dewey, 1938, 1980; Pierce, 1995; Lawler & Thye, 1999), the evidence collected through this project revealed that 1) social interaction could assist language development by moving knowledge from an interpersonal through an intrapersonal level; 2) social, cultural, and affective factors manifest in interaction through linguistic and paralinguistic means; 3) these social, cultural, and affective factors

### *“A theory of knowledge acquisition that sees learners constructing their own knowledge and meanings on the basis of personal experiences”*

had an impact on learner performance during L2 tasks. L2 acquisition is a dialectic process where one more capable participant provides assistance to a less capable participant to develop, in this case, language skills (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In our data, LRE instances between Miroslava and Karla suggest that Miroslava acted as the more capable learner who, by means of a direct verbal correction, scaffolded Karla’s task performance, who seemed the less capable learner in the appropriate use of the lexical items (see Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976 cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2007) -

Congruent with Vygotsky’s (1987) socio-cultural theory, Karla was other-regulated, aided by Miroslava, and consequently move up in her poten-

tial zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) towards the correct use of a lexical item that she could not have used otherwise. Lexical learning in this vein is in line with Vygotsky’s (1987) socio-cultural theory, that claims that language learned in interaction is first imitated and then internalized moving from a social to a cognitive plane. When Miroslava corrected Karla, Karla imitated the word and immediately incorporated it into her speech through a reformulation of her contribution. When Karla was later prompted by the teacher/researcher into using the term, she was able to recall it without any assistance. She had become self-regulated in the use of this lexical item at least at the moment of the task development.

Constructivism is defined as “a theory of knowledge acquisition that sees learners constructing their own knowledge and meanings on the basis of personal experiences” (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 806). During task completion, various social aspects led to individual construction of reality through personal experiences as the analysis of Miguel and Miroslava’s linguistic and paralinguistic contributions about local weather and traffic conditions shows. The contribution of the Constructivist Theory (Firth & Wagner, 2007) to SLA is the notion that learners bring to language interactions a body of experiences that enrich the interactional process prompting learning. Moreover, the identities learners adopt in collaborative work were also identified. According to Pierce’s (1995) Identity Theory, during language interaction, learners form “communities of practice” (Ortega, 2009, p. 242), to which they strive to become members of and that demand that they take specific roles that will dictate their behavior, ideology, and even their language use for acceptance. Our study showed that learners assumed roles that dictate the dynamics of their participation in the interaction but also dele-

gate their interlocutors certain roles for which these might be or not be prepared to assume, and display feelings that serve as complimentary pieces of information that scaffold communication.

## CONCLUSION

Social Theories of analysis do not attempt to separate the cognitive from the socio-cultural dimension. In the end, the cognitive emerges from the socio-cultural dimension (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The aim of this paper was to examine the role of linguistic, social, cultural, and affective variables in interactional tasks as potential factors that lead to L2 learning through a model that addresses both cognitive and socio-cultural variables. Our findings are congruent with Socio-Cultural Theories in regard to three premises: **1)** social interaction assists the development of language skills by moving knowledge from an interpersonal through an intrapersonal level; **2)** socio-cultural factors manifest in interaction through linguistic and paralinguistic means; and **3)** these socio-cultural factors have an impact on learners' behavior and language development and use.

In the context of foreign language learning, it appears that the language classroom becomes the "social milieu" for learners (cited in Swain and Deters, 2007, p. 823). The analysis of learner performance in this study informs teaching practices in regards to the cognitive and socio-cultural elements that come into play in language interactions, the kinds of tasks that promote linguistic and socio-cultural competence development in the L2, and enables teachers to gain a better understanding of the L2 acquisition phenomena. Particularly interesting, though incidental to this research, is how learners, contrary to SLA focus on linguistic de-

velopment (Duff & Talmy, 2011), frequently deployed strategic and discourse skills to compensate for underdeveloped linguistic knowledge and always achieved the task communicative goals.

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