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Ancillary and Constitutive Discourse in Second Language Learning Tasks

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Abstract

Making use of an ecological perspective, activity theory and systemic functional linguistics, this study presents a theoretical framework for designing second language classroom tasks. An ecological perspective implies that language use emerges as learners take action to mediate cognition, making use of a rich 'semiotic budget' (van Lier, 2000) present within the environment. This suggests that the quality of an environment, learners' perception of that environment, and their utilization of the environment for taking action are of vital importance. Activity theory theorizes the relationship between human action and language use. Activities are realized by multiple actions, which are specific to contexts. In order to achieve goals human action is taken mediated either by material tools or symbolic tools. Language use is a mediational tool to achieve human action. Systemic functional linguistics is adopted to explain the role of language. A key factor is the degree of context dependency in language use. Hasan (1985) makes a distinction between language being either ancillary or constitutive in different events. Tasks eliciting ancillary language use make low language demands that restrict learners to an unchallenging learning opportunity lacking in affordances for learners to invest themselves beyond the physical action required. In contrast, tasks requiring learners to engage in context-independent language use make a higher demand on lexicogrammatical use. The author argues that successful learning emerges from task design incorporating an appropriate level of challenge in meaningful tasks that enable learners to transform their participation.

Introduction

Classroom tasks are of vital importance in the language learning classroom. This is especially true for those students working in situations

where they have limited opportunities to use language outside the classroom. Task-based approaches to language learning (Bygates, Skehan, and Swain, 2001; Nunan, 2004) have attracted significant attention in the literature of SLA. However, as noted by Ellis (2006), task-based approaches have been informed by mainstream SLA that is based on an individual cognitive account of the human mind. Language learning is considered to occur in the black box in which linguistic input is processed and accessed for output. In contrast, social approaches to SLA provide a very different account of the processes of language acquisition, shedding light on the social dimension involved in the development of language. Accordingly, from such a perspective, a re-examination of language-learning tasks is called for, one shedding light on the external factors contributing to language learning. Hence this article explores how to understand and design tasks, drawing on an ecological perspective, activity theory and systemic functional linguistics.

An Ecological Perspective: Perception and Action

Ecology is the study of the complex relationships between the environment and organisms, an approach that has recently been applied to research within the field of psychology (Gibson, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Reed, 1996; Bronfenbenner and Ceci, 1994) and linguistics (Trim, 1959; Makkai, 1993; Halliday, 1994), including second language acquisition (Kramersch, 2002; Leather and van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000; 2003; 2004). Key concepts in ecology include contextual dependence, relationships, agency, diversity, and general systems theory (Kramersch and Steffensen, 2008). Applied to SLA, ecological studies investigate the contextualized or situated nature of language learning in the environment (van Lier, 2004). An ecological approach considers the entire situation and examines what enables learning to occur.

Context is not simply what provides input—assigned a relatively passive role by mainstream SLA. Rather, ecological approaches to SLA assume that context is the source of learning. Under such a conceptualization classrooms are perceived as contexts where complex nonlinear dynamics unfold as intentionally driven learners interact with a purposefully designed learning environment (Young, Depalma and Garrett, 2002).

Affordance, or opportunities for meaning making emerging from the perception of a meaningful way of relating to the environment (van Lier, 2002), is the crucial concept that is used in explaining the importance of relations in an ecological perspective. van Lier (2000) emphasizes that affordance should be perceived as the opportunity for action: an affordance is a particular property of the environment that is relevant—for good or for ill—to an active, perceiving organism in that environment. An affordance affords further action, but does not cause or trigger it (van Lier, 2000). From van Lier's perspective, it is assumed that engaged learners are more likely to notice affordances in their linguistic environment and make use of these in language use. That is, an engaged learner is more likely to notice affordances available and, consequently, is also more likely to make use of them. Accordingly, since active and engaged learners are those most likely to profit from rich linguistic and social affordances in communication, it is important in the classroom to provide a 'semiotic budget' (van Lier, 2000), that is, opportunities for engagement in meaning making activities for active language users.

Activity Theory: the Mediational Role of Language

As well as an ecological perspective that emphasizes the perception and purposeful action of an actor, the study of learning from a social perspective

needs to be supplemented by analyses of resources or mediational tools and activities from an activity theory perspective. Within activity theory, the primary unit of analysis is human activity and the sociocultural context in which this activity is carried out. Activity theory is a later development of Vygotsky's work of conceptualization of human cognition. Vygotsky was concerned about the relationship between an individual's mind and socially organized ways of acting and thinking. Accordingly, in an attempt to understand human cognition, examination of human activity or practices as a functional system is at the centre of activity theory. That is, human cognition is conceptualized in the context of physically and socially motivated activities. This also implies that, in purposeful activity, the actors' perception shifts according to the actors' situational context.

The concept of mediated action in activity theory explains semantic and pragmatic aspects of ecology. Central to Vygotsky's conceptualization is the idea of mediation. Vygotsky made use of a triangle to explain the socially mediated nature of human behavior (Figure 1). An agent or subject (a person) has a goal or objective for an action. This action is mediated by a symbolic or physical tool. Accordingly, Wertsch (1993) defined the unit of analysis as a tool-mediated action. Conceptualizing the interconnected nature of the three

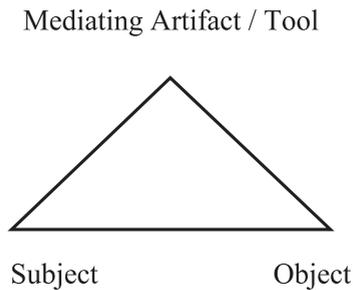


Figure 1 Vygotsky's basic mediated action triangle (adapted from Cole & Engestrom, 1993)

elements in action this way, it is possible to see that the human is not divorced from the context from which meditational means are selected.

Within activity theory language use is considered a mediational means for achieving the goals of actions. However, the role of language use has been given little consideration in research. One of the few studies has been conducted by Wells (1999) who, drawing on activity theory, investigated the role of discourse as meditational means. Wells argues that education is an activity of 'dialogic enquiry', suggesting that through social interaction with others children learn to use 'the language tool-kit' – the genres of classroom instruction, which constitute the range of linguistic means by which different kinds of action are operationalized. Accordingly, 'spoken discourse has an important role to play in mediating the pupil's apprenticeship into a discipline, both as a medium in which to respond to and prepare for work on written text and.... as an opportunity of 'talking their way in' to ways of making sense of new information. in forms that, *with the assistance provided by the teacher*, gradually incorporate the essential features of the discourse of particular discipline' (Wells cited by Gibbons, 2006, p. 174). Language is not just a mediator of social activity enabling participants to participate in an activity but is also the tool that mediates mental activities (Gibbons, 2006).

Lastly, it is of note that as Lantolf (2000) suggested, activities are of an unstable nature. An activity may shift to a different activity as a subject finds a different goal. This shift is accompanied by adoption of different mediational tools to carry out the new activity. Additionally, different activities may be taking place in the same classroom although learners are engaged in the same pedagogical task. Different learners have different motives with different goals as the object of their actions despite their engagement in the same classroom tasks. Students play a major role in shaping the goal and outcomes of tasks set for them. Thus, while task-based

learning has been promoted in the recent literature, learning is not controllable. How learners engage with a task as an activity depends on how individual learners perceive the goal and the ultimate outcomes of tasks (Lantolf, 2000).

Systemic Functional Linguistics: Different Orders of Discourse

In order to explain the mediational role of language further, the study draws on systemic function linguistics as the third theoretical framework. It is a linguistic theory that provides an account of language from a social perspective. While innatist linguistic theories regard language as a mental process, systemic functional linguistics is concerned with how language is used in social contexts to achieve particular goals. With their focus on language use, systemic functional linguistics places greater importance on language function than on language structure. Additionally, systemic functional linguistics postulates that language is a semiotic system or a set of choices from which speakers select depending on the social situation they are in, rather than a fixed code that has to be acquired. Accordingly, while innatists argue that language is programmed, systemic functional linguistics implies that children have to learn how to use language according to different social and interactional contexts.

The semiotic systematic interpretation of language as a set of resources to choose according to the context is explicated in discussion of the concept of register (Halliday & Hassan, 1985). One of the most distinctive features of systemic functional linguistics is the premise that language varies according to context. It is context that determines the type of language use or register, and this can be characterized by three aspects: the field of the discourse, the tenor of the discourse and the mode of discourse. Field is concerned with the

cultural activity: what participants make the focus of joint attention. Tenor is concerned with the relationship between participants: how they relate to each other. Mode is concerned with the role of language in interaction, function “in relation to the social action” (Halliday, 1977, p.201): how much work language is doing. The choice of meaning is realized by a set of choices with respect to these three contextual features.

In examination of mode, two modes, spoken and written languages, have been widely discussed (Christie 1992; Martine 1984). The linguistic difference between the two modes is that spoken language is context dependent and uses everyday lexis while written language is content independent and synoptic in structure (Eggins, 1994). In general, however, it can be better explained that the linguistic difference in mode is concerned with variation in context dependency. According to Hasan (1973, p.284), context dependent language is language “that does not encapsulate explicitly all the features of the relevant immediate situation in which the verbal interaction is embedded” whereas context independent language is the opposite as “correct decoding of the message is a simple function of one’s understanding of language, requiring no extra-linguistic sources of knowledge. Hasan further argues that context dependency is best understood as a continuum or cline according to language function.

Hasan (1985) makes a distinction between language being ancillary or constitutive in different events in describing variation on the mode continuum. In ancillary language use, the interactant is less dependent on language use and can call upon context to facilitate social action. Accordingly, the lexico-grammatical requirement made of her is low. However, constitutive language use is relatively independent of context, with the learner required to make use of more complex lexico-grammar. Martin (1984; 1992) provides a model of mode continuum. Based on the understanding that

mode is affected by the distance between language and what is being talked about, language in action is placed at one end of the continuum and language as reflection at the other end of the continuum. Cloran (1999, 2000) also provides a model of mode variation as a scale with ancillary at one end and constitutive at the other end of the continuum (See Figure 2). In Cloran's model various types of discourse are arranged along the continuum according to degree of contextual dependency.

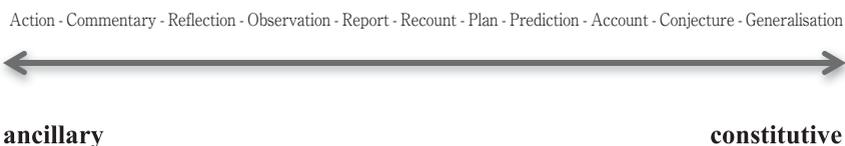


Figure 2 The role of language in the social process (Cloran, 1999, p.37)

Action and Commentary are most ancillary as the interactants talk about the interactants themselves or other co-present persons or objects existing *here* in the situation in terms of the location, and events are taking place *now* in terms of the temporal orientation. Reflection and Observation are nearer the centre of the continuum. The location of interactants is *here* but events they participate in are not *now* but *always* or happening habitually. Report, Recount, Plan and Prediction are presented as intermediate and may involve either here or now. Lastly Conjecture involves events that are entirely imaginary and Account and Generalization involve objects that are situationally absent or class-exhaustive (Cloran, 1999).

The notion of context dependency offers a notable implication for language development and education. Language development is concerned with the degree to which learners can produce. According to Vygotsky (1981) the role of language is deeply related with the development of higher mental functioning. In his account of the development of word meaning, words serve

as indicative or indexical functions in the early stage of development. Later, speech serves a symbolic function that enables the child to develop the ability to abstract, generalize and form relationships between categories. Language development is the process of transition from contextualization to decontextualization. Halliday also provides a similar account of the relationship between language development and contextual dependency. At the beginning children produce language of 'here and now'. Later children learn to reconstruct their experiences through language alone or express generalization (Halliday, 1975; 1993).

Donaldson (1987) also explains the relationship between decontextualization and cognitive development. According to Donaldson, disembedded thinking is what is required in education in general. She argues the difficulties associated with disembedded thinking are related to linguistic demands in many cases. In the embedded context, the physical setting provides children with clues to assist the processing of linguistic information. However, in the context of disembedded language use extra-linguistic assistance is not available and accordingly, the child has to make use of her own cognitive ability.

In the school context students are required to develop the ability to produce text that is independent of the immediate context. Accordingly, in the educational context, the notion of mode and mode continuum with ancillary and constitutive along the continuum need to be given due consideration. As Gibbons (2006) suggests, the mode continuum from ancillary to constitutive reflects the process of education. Learners have to transform their language use from a personal everyday way of making meaning towards socially shared discourse of academic concepts. Producing language as action where visual and other contextual clues provide meaning means that learners do not need to make use of elaborate linguistic resources. However, in contexts where more context-reduced texts are evident, there

are greater demands on the learners to make use of lexico-grammatical resources.

Implications for Task Design from an Ecological Perspective, Activity Theory and Systemic Functional Linguistics

Binding all the three theoretical frameworks together, this section seeks to provide implications for designing tasks for the second language classroom. The starting point is insight obtained from the ecological perspective that posits that an active perceiving agent is a prerequisite for learning to occur. From the ecological perspective learning emerges from the affordances while the learner is engaged in activities and takes an action in making meaning. The active learner with agency learns by picking information in the learning environment to achieve purposes. This notion of agency has also attracted attention in studies carried out from the framework of activity theory. Learners' goals and agency are recognised to play a significant role as learners orient themselves to tasks (Coughlan & Duff, 1984, Platt & Brooks, 1994, Donato, 2000). They may re-orient tasks depending on their goals, resulting in different activities. Different learners perceive different affordances. From an ecological approach it is difficult to predict beforehand what the learner will focus on. Accordingly, as van Lier (2007) suggests, action based approaches that start with activities in which learners find their own purposes and needs may be one way to provide such a learning condition. This is in contrast to mainstream SLA in which learners are regarded as the receiver of input. Active learning is diverse, unpredictable and self-initiated, emerging in an unpredictable way from meaningful activity (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

To learners with active agency the teacher is required to provide

resources that learners perceive usable and to guide them to perceive them for achieving their goals. The question is how to make learners perceive and utilize them. One solution is for teachers to provide learners with a rich environment in the classroom. In the ecological approach the environment consists of physical, social and symbolic affordances. Linguistic affordances are available if the active learner picks up relevant linguistic expressions. In so doing, learners activate their awareness of specific language structures and lexical meaning. Given such resources or mediational tools in a sociocultural sense, learning emerges as learners are able to achieve their goals in action by making use of linguistic resources in the task.

The learner's growth, however, has a limited capacity within the ecosystem (van Geert, 1995) of language development. Therefore the amount of support/resources that the environment provides has to be in the range that can be utilized by the learner. The resources can be used to promote further development to the limit of the carrying capacity of the learner beyond the current level. Accordingly, it is required to design tasks in which the learners perceive language as a tool to take an action and a challenge to promote further growth. Linguistically, a major focus should be placed on how students can be supported by providing affordances with an appropriate challenge in the task. The linguistic challenges and support should be balanced so that learners can perceive them accessible and make use of them in a meaningful task. In task a learner might use only that minimal expected language required to accomplish the task. However, the task might better be designed so that learners are challenged to use additional language resources that should not be too difficult but within their capacities. Lantolf (2000) compares affordances with the concept of ZPD, that is, a level challenging enough to stretch learners' potential.

Using the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics helps

to reveal how to provide linguistic challenges and support in tasks. Language being fundamentally a tool for thinking with a meaning-making resource (as opposed to a set of codes), systemic functional linguistics suggests that participants are enabled to express their beliefs and values by choosing the way to interact within the affordances and constraints of the situation. This suggests that register is concerned with operationalization of social action rather than purely linguistics, which is congruent with activity theory (Wells, 1999). In the study (Wertsch et al, as cited by Wells, 1999), two pairs of mothers are engaged in completing a puzzle with their children. The study reveals the way they operationalize the action of completing the puzzle differs significantly. One sees it as an activity of education using low controlling language, and the other sees it as an activity of completing efficiently deploying a controlling language of interaction. In terms of register they chose different tenor and mode based on different values, resulting in different types of register. Even if they are engaged in the same task, the difference implies that they are engaged in different sociocultural activities. The implication for SLA tasks is that, as the teacher chooses topics and activities to engage in, the manner in which they relate to each other, and the role of language they choose as semiotic tools to use in the task, teachers are engaged in the creation of different types of affordances. Accordingly, the concept of register, in particular the idea of mode that accounts for variations of linguistic behavior, has the potential to offer significant insights into how to create affordances in the language learning classroom.

So far little research has been carried out to analyse the influence of ancillary and constitutive language use in SLA. In her study of L1 development, Cloran (1999) revealed a relationship between children's literacy development and particular discourse patterns at home. Decontextualized patterns that are at the constitutive end along the mode

continuum emerged as a necessary precondition for the development of high level cognitive and literacy skills. She argues that such discourse patterns should be promoted at home in everyday interaction with young children before starting schooling. Gibbon's study (2006) reveals how scaffolding is provided for students to shift from contextualized language use to decontextualized language use in the mainstream English as an additional language context. There is an obvious shortage in SLA studies focusing on language demands in terms of ancillary or constitutive language use. However, following Vygotsky's assumption that language use transforms from indexical to conceptual, it would appear to follow that it is important to guide learner's language use from indexical to conceptual in the second language learning classroom.

It is challenging for second language learners to engage in tasks in which constitutive language use is required. However, this does not mean that SLA learners should not be given linguistically and cognitively demanding tasks in which language use plays a significant role. Not all second language learners will be required to engage in highly advanced academic work in English where language use plays a significant role. Tasks with ancillary language use are needed at the in the early stages of language learning. However, teachers should also be aware of the need to gradually introduce tasks with constitutive language use. Initially teachers could make such tasks accessible by providing visual and other types of support. In recognition of the importance of learners' active engagement in tasks, and in acknowledgement of the diversity of learners' interests and purposes—the need to foster more voices and agency—it is surely the teacher's duty to equip learners with the appropriate ability to make use of different types of linguistic repertoires. If learners are perceived as active agents, then as learners they ought rightly to be engaged in actions rather than receivers of input, copiers and followers

of teacher's instruction. Active learners should be enabled to express their voices and take decisions for their own actions. To assist such growth, learners should be equipped with the ability to make choices for different types of social actions making use of a variety of linguistic resources. Accordingly, it is important to consider the relationship between types of language use and types of social action and how to incorporate linguistic demands into tasks.

Conclusion

This paper began with the author's interest in pedagogy in classroom second language learning. Feeling a need to account for the process of language learning and pedagogy from a holistic perspective, SLA was explained as an emergent phenomenon, triggered by affordances in the environment. SLA conceptualized this way suggests that learning is dependent on an individual learner's perception of affordances and goals to relate better with the world. Recognizing the crucial role of affordances and the mediating functions of language in the educational context, there is a need to incorporate linguistic challenges in task design. As Swain (2006) argues, 'language is not just "a conveyer of meaning but also" an agent in the making of meaning... When a person is producing language, what he or she is engaging in is a cognitive activity: an activity of the mind' (p.96). Accordingly, tasks should be designed so that the learners are equipped with the ability to choose linguistic resources, the cognitive tool, to express their voices. The teacher's role is to guide them to transform their language use from ancillary to constitutive. The implication for research is a need to conduct an empirical study to examine how different modes could be incorporated in language learning tasks.

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