

Original Paper

A Review of Theories in L2 Socialization and Cognitive Approaches to Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

In the past 20 years, there is a shifting trend in the second language acquisition (SLA) field departing from the traditional “logical science” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006) to a context-oriented perspective for its robust power in exploring social factors beyond individual internal cognition in L2 processing research. While context-oriented researchers claim the formal linguistic-focused research decontextualizes L2 learning from its environment and thus is problematic to comprehensively explain the L2 acquisition process, some scholars taking formal linguistic perspectives resist such critique and contend that social conditions are neither sufficient nor “necessary for scientific discovery” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 15). Within this paper, I will interrogate what differentiates the cognitive paradigm from L2 socialization paradigm in terms of second language acquisition.

Keywords

Second language acquisition, socialization, cognitive approach

1. An Introduction to Cognitive Perspectives on SLA

Drawing on cognitive psychology, linguistics, construction grammar, computer science, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience, cognitive perspective researchers seek to find explanations for second language acquisition with regard to “mental representation and information processing” (Ellis, 1999, p. 22). Remaining a mainstream role, cognitive oriented theories have been developed and evolved through various stages and strands.

1.1 The origin of cognitive perspectives on SLA

Historically, research of L2 learning lies in the acquisition of the grammar—morphology and syntax—generating “much heat as well as light” (Lardiere, 2012, p. 125). Noam Chomsky, the founder of modern linguistics, proposes a nativist view of language acquisition in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957) which opens up a new page in the field of linguistics. According to Chomsky, a language acquisition

device (LAD) is hypothesized as a learning tool hardwired into the brain, through which children learn and understand language automatically and rapidly. This theoretical concept is used to explain the innate understanding of grammar and syntax that all children possess. Later, this concept is developed to the theory of universal grammar (UG) which implies the grammatical features shared in human languages. In other words, according to this view of language processing, humans are born with the competence (innate ability) of learning grammar without being taught. Since the LAD concept and UG are originally attempted to account for the phenomena of L1 acquisition, they are named under *nativism*. Yet, over time, attempts have been made to link this theory to L2 acquisition due to some shared features in language learning processing.

1.2 Cognitive Linguistics

Unlike universal grammar which asserts language is a separate cognitive ability independent from other mental cognition, cognitive linguistic (CI) instead, states that language is integrated with other cognitive abilities. Coined by George Lakoff (1987) and founded and pushed forward by Ronald Langacker (1987), cognitive linguistics assumes that language mirrors human conceptualization, emphasizing the inherent symbolic function of language, and seeking to “explain the mental processes governing the perception, production and acquisition of language” (Masuda & Arnett, 2015, p. 2). Collectively, for cognitive linguistics, what one chooses to express is a reflection of one’s mental conception of an object or event. What comes to be “inspirational” (Gettys & Lech, 2013) to many SLA cognitive researchers is the development of a usage-based (UB) model. Grounded in cognitive linguistics, the UB model views grammar as a product of language use (Langacker, 1987). In other words, a speaker extracts *schema* (pattern/rule) and gets it entrenched through repeated exposure to actual conversations. Since this model views grammar as being embedded in expressions whereby learners learn it through the process of “learning from exemplars”, it has the benefits of avoiding redundant rote memorization of grammar and encouraging students to create with the language from the “learned elements” (Gettys & Lech, 2013, p. 9).

1.3 Psycholinguistics

According to Nick Ellis, psycholinguistics demonstrates that “many aspects of language skill intimately reflect prior language use in that they are tuned to the learner’s relative frequencies of lifetime experience with respect to language and the world” (1999, p. 25). For psycholinguistics, people learn language from using and practicing language. Since people do not consciously count the frequencies when using language, the process of language understanding is “predominantly unconscious” (1999, p. 27).

1.4 Emergentism

Differing from the biological nature of universal grammar, emergentism purports that the process of second language acquisition occurs in a “bottom up” fashion, that is, grammatical rules and other formal aspects of language “emerge” constructively and abstractly from language use and experience (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013) by “being exposed to a massive and complex environment” (Ellis, 1999, p. 27). In this perspective (Ellis, 1998; MacWhinney, 2008), the emergence of complex language

representations can be acquired through simple learning mechanisms. However, many advocates of this model have failed in either defeating the poverty of the stimulus (ROC) or demonstrating how language competence could “emerge” in reference to the universal grammar theory (Gregg, 2003). The poverty of the stimulus (Laurence & Margolis, 2001) argues that children are not “empiricist learners” because children do learn certain grammar even in a data lacking environment. Therefore, to justify emergentism, researchers have to demonstrate that “the environment is indeed rich enough, and rich in the right ways, to bring about the emergence of linguistic competence” (Gregg, 2003, p. 102).

2. An Introduction to L2 Socialization

Developed from anthropology with an interest in understanding human being’s social and cultural development in a society, L2 socialization researchers believe that SLA happens fundamentally, not auxiliary, through social interaction. Postulating that “SLA is not situated in processes but in people embedded in activity” (Lantolf, 1996), L2 socialization paradigm constitutes diverse approaches due to the historical development of the paradigm and different type of “research question that is in focus in each of these approaches” (Veronique, 2013, p. 256).

2.1 The Origin of L2 Socialization and Sociocultural Theory

L2 socialization researchers closely identify their studies with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT). Though originally grounded in the cognitive paradigm, SCT distinguishes itself from traditional cognitive approaches with the emphasis of “social dimension of consciousness”, which, citing from Vygotsky, “is primary in time and fact” and “the individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary” (1979, p. 30). In language socialization research, the interconnected processes of individual and cultural dimension in different communicative contexts are investigated and examined. “The linguistic forms used in these contexts and their social significance affect how learners come to understand and use language structures and roles” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 40).

Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), private speech, and mediation have greatly inspired social-oriented L2 researchers (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The ZPD describes the learning potential that a student can reach with the assistance of a more capable/knowledgeable person through the processes of collaboration (Vygotsky, 1987). According to Vygotsky, human beings’ mental processes are mediated through an individual’s cultural-specific interaction with others and with culturally-constructed/deployed artifacts, of which, language has the utmost importance. The usefulness of mediation depends on whether it is sensitive to the individual’s ZPD, that is, L2 learning needs to be mediated in the zone of proximal development to reach its “real development” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p.39). Private speech, as is investigated by some social SLA researchers (e.g., Guerrero, 2005; Lantolf, 2003), manifests the process in which second language appropriation is mediated. This mediation approach is also called the “genetic method” (Vygotsky, 1978).

2.2 *Situated-learning*

Situated learning is most notably represented by Lave and Wenger (1991). Their notion of community of practice, conceptualized as “learning in situated ways - in the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 32) foregrounds the conception of learners’ participation in certain social practices. Consequently, it is possible to get evidence of a second language development from people’s participation in social practices.

The proposed concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” allows us to see the possibility that an unsuccessful L2 learner might be the result of “processes of exclusion and subordination [that] operate locally” (p. 135). This indicates a shift of the SLA focus from individual achievements to a complex sociohistorical context.

2.3 *Critical Theory*

The use of critical theory in second language learning takes a stance of examining the power relations to fully understand the learning practices, interactions, and processes. Moreover, critical theory oriented researchers contend that this understanding of power relations in L2 learning should lead to social and educational changes for more equitable social relations. The identity of L2 learners is highly emphasized in critical studies as it is shaped by language (Norton, 1995). According to Norton, identity means “a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is construed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (2000, p. 5). Therefore, power relations in a particular second language learning setting can prioritize some identities while marginalizing others.

2.4 *The Tensions and Debates of Cognitive and Socialization Perspectives*

In 1996, at the conference of the International Association of Applied Linguistics, Firth and Wagner presented in a symposium critiquing the cognitive hegemony in the SLA field. This was followed by a series of presenters who took various positions in response to Firth and Wagner’s critique. Some researchers (e.g., Hall, Kasper, Poulisse, Long, Gass, Jordan, Beretta, Crooks) attacked cognitive perspectives while others (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, Zuengler, Miller, Lantolf, Thorn, Block) criticized them for being “science envy” (Block, 1996, p. 67). The controversy between the two camps, according to Zuengler and Miller, lies in two main aspects: ontology and epistemology. To be more specific, language acquisition versus language use (ontology) and positivism versus relativism (epistemology). Compiling from Larsen-Freeman (2007) and Zuengler and Miller’s (2006) work, the following table shows the disparities between the two perspectives.

Table 1. Disparities Between Cognitive and Socialization Perspectives on SLA

		Cognitive	Socialization
Ontology	Role of context	Social context is the site in which L2 acquisition takes place;	Social context influences performance. Social factors are related to systematic variation in learner language.
	Nature of language	Language is a mental construct.	Language is a social construct
	Objects of Inquiry in Language-focused Research	The aggregation and increasing complexity and control of linguistic structures by learners.	Discursive routines of communication processes.
	Perspective on Evaluating Learners' Progress	Progress is measured by where along the route toward target proficiency the learner is as indicated by the learner's linguistic performance.	What is at issue is what the learner does with the resources that are available.
	Primary Level of Research Conceptualizations	Macro-level idealizations, in other words, native speaker, learner.	Microlevel social relationships that are being achieved through talk in progress
	Epistemology	Primary research focus	Language acquisition
Nature of learning		Change in mental state	Change in social participation
Identity of Research Participant		The salient identity of the participant in a research study is that of a learner.	The identity that the research participant adopts makes a huge difference, and it may not be that of learner.
Philosophical Orientation		Scientific, value-free inquiry, Modernist	A critical view Postmodernist
Attitudes Toward Acceptance of SLA Theories		One theory will prevail; empiricism will determine. Positivist	Multiple theories are welcome, even necessary. Relativist; pluralist

3. Conclusion

Researchers' attitudes toward the tensions of the two camps vary. Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003) reject the cognitive/socialization dichotomy because they view the cognitive paradigm originating "in social interaction" (p. 156). In contrast, Larsen-Freeman (2007) argues the gap is fundamental and therefore not resolvable. Similarly, Gregg (1993) and Berreta and Crooks (1993) dismiss the argument that social aspects can cause content among theories. However, scholars such as Lantolf (2000), Thorne (2005), Swain and Lapkin (1998) are positive in exploring a broader framework which acknowledges contributions from each side and integrates both parts. As is said by Jane Zuengler, "the traditional positivist paradigm is no longer the only prominent paradigm in the field, relativism has become an

alternative paradigm. For a complicated research area such as the SLA, it is still too early for us to conclude which paradigm is better off the other because each theory introduced above has its strength and limitations, not to mention there are still many mysteries for researchers to delve into (e.g., how learners' identity impact the second language acquisition). As such, tensions, debates, and a growing diversity of theories are healthy and stimulating for a field like SLA" (2006, p. 35). Let us hope for a future where "all the flowers bloom" (Lantolf, 1996) in the wonderland of second language learning.

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