**Discourse and Second Language Learning**

**Introduction**

It is axiomatic that second language learning occurs in varying discourses, whether they are monologic or dialogic, verbal or non-verbal, instructional or non-instructional. Analysis of both the big ‘D’ discourse and the little ‘d’ discourse (Gee, 2012) can promote the understanding of how a second language is learned and used. Insights resulting from discourse analysis can provide the field of second language acquisition (SLA) with important theoretical, methodological and pedagogical implications. The maturation of the field of discourse analysis has influenced the evolution of research in SLA and vice versa, despite the tension between cognitive versus social orientations. Meaningful discussions have arisen since Firth and Wagner (1997). These have revealed the problems and difficulties that emerge in the implementation of discourse analysis to second language learning. Moreover, they have contributed significantly to new developments in the intersection of the two fields and our apprehension of the epistemology concerning second language learning.

**Early Developments**

In the intersection of discourse and SLA, the strain between psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives has existed for decades. From the psycholinguistic perspective, language is a purely cognitive phenomenon and SLA occurs in negotiated interaction between native speakers and learners or among learners (e.g., Hatch, 1978; Long, 1983). However, negotiated interaction is also quintessentially social. Indeed, from the sociolinguistic perspective, language learners employ linguistic forms resourcefully and strategically to achieve social and interactional purposes and collaborate with other speakers to construct meaningful discourse. In this case, SLA is impacted by contextual factors in social interaction (e.g., Tarone, 1988, 2007).

Negotiated interaction has been thought to encourage language learners to stretch their linguistic abilities in second language by means of checking their comprehension of the discourse until mutual understanding is achieved. Hatch (1978) went so far as to propose that out of discourse comes syntax; that is to say, the ability to use native-like strings of words into sentences emanates from participation in discourse in the target language. Long (1983) found negotiated interaction to be replete with such moves as comprehension checks, clarification requests, confirmation checks, repetitions and reformulations. These serve the learner by aiding in comprehension of the ongoing discourse and providing necessary feedback on the learner's comprehensibility.

Labovian sociolinguistic perspectives on SLA were explored in Tarone’s (1988) early work on variation and SLA. These studies focused on variability in learner usage along the dimension of attention to speech. A somewhat different approach was taken by studies focusing on accommodation theory perspectives on SLA (e.g., Beebe and Giles, 1984). This research looked specifically at formality/informality of context and interlocutor relationships and their effects on second language production.

Acculturation is another important early discourse perspective on second language learning (e.g., Schumann, 1986). This theory focused on immigrant group members’ language acquisition along the dimensions of social distance and psychological distance. It has served to put forward a more macro sociolinguistic view of factors involved in successful second language learning. As such, it is an important early view of the connection between discourse and second language learning.

Also significant are the early contributions of studies focusing on classroom discourse and interaction (e.g., Mehan, 1979). This body of research examined the discourse features of language and content classrooms with particular attention to teacher and student ‘moves’. An important construct to emerge from this research is the ‘IRF’ (initiation, response, feedback) pattern typical of classroom interaction. Classroom discourse is an important area for analysis that continues in the studies on tutored second language development.

Cross-cultural discourse has been an important focus of work on *Crosstalk* spearheaded by John Gumperz (1982). This perspective focuses on the use of differing contextualization cues by speakers of languages in multilingual settings. Although many SLA studies from a cross-cultural perspective have focused on bilingual speakers’ linguistic deficiencies and communicative problems (e.g., Scollon and Scollon, 1995), a few (e.g., Kasper, 1997) have demonstrated cross-cultural communication as an accomplishment of NS and NNS speakers in a non-instructional setting.

**Major Contributions**

**Theoretical Frameworks for Discourse and Language Learning**

Applied linguists have argued for a comprehensive theory of SLA. Firth and Wagner (1997: 286) called for a reconceptualization of SLA in terms of: “(a) a significantly enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use, (b) an increased emic (i.e., participant-relevant) sensitivity toward fundamental concepts, and (c) the broadening of the traditional SLA database.” Aligning with this, Rampton (1997) contended that the current state of world globalization necessitates new perspectives on what it means to be a language ‘learner’ and ‘user’. Currently, language learning is no longer seen as a purely cognitive phenomenon by most researchers interested in discourse and SLA. The issue of the ‘native speaker’ is obfuscated in a shrinking planet.

In order to adequately analyze the best processes for applying findings on discourse analysis to SLA, we must assess the usefulness of existing theories, models, and frameworks for the processes involved in the development of language ability in second/additional languages. Several theoretical models offer very important insights into these processes: (a) Language Identity, (b) Language Socialization, (c) Sociocultural Theory, and (d) Conversation Analysis.

**Language Identity**

Influenced by poststructuralist theories, the identity approach to SLA (cf. Norton and McKinney, 2011) foregrounds struggles over meaning and legitimacy, and aims to uncover second language learners’ understanding of their relationship to the world and the dynamic, changing nature of the relationship over time and space. Learners’ investment in an additional language is coupled with expectation to obtain access to target language resources. Their non-participation might reflect their identification with imagined communities rather than low motivation. Their identities are discursively constructed and socioculturally embedded.

Some applied linguists have examined how incorporating an additional language and culture impacts on one’s sense of who one is in the world. For example, McKay and Wong (1996) focused on the importance of fluid individual and social identities and their relation to multiple discourses (e.g., immigrant, minority, academic, gender). The identity of an individual in the process of SLA affects agency. Agency enhancement affords learners a sense of power over their environment and thereby learning. In a somewhat parallel view, Boxer and Cortes-Conde (2000) put forth the concept of ‘relational identity’ (RID), which is displayed and developed between and among specific interlocutors in their interactions over time and which affords comfort to build on sequential interactions that rest on rapport and solidarity. This relationship built among interlocutors leads naturally to further interaction and, consequently, increased opportunities for language development.

It seems likely that the first and foremost resource of those involved in additional language learning involves face-to-face (or digital) discourse. Second language users must grapple with fluid and shifting identities--individual, social, and relational--and come to terms with the power relations inherent in them. Whether or not those in the position of taking on new linguistic and cultural identities choose to appropriate or reject the ‘affordances’ of the new language/culture may depend largely on the lived histories of the individuals, the contexts of their interactions, and the power relationships inherent in these contexts.

**Language Socialization**

The language socialization framework of studying linguistic and cultural development derives from Schieffelin and Ochs (1986). It views second language learning as a socioculturally situated, longitudinally oriented, unpredictable and multidirectional process. While more competent members of society can help learners acquire second language cultural knowledge and communicative practices over time, learners can also socialize experts into their own subjectivities and practices (Duff and Talmy, 2011). Research along this line has been expanded in the past two decades from a focus on child development to a broader scope including adult second language learning in various settings (Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

Contemporary language socialization theory has incorporated with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Community of Practice framework in SLA research. Second language learners might start out as legitimate peripheral participants in a less empowered position and later grow to fully participate in target language social practices, which indicates their language development. This has been demonstrated in classroom discourse, where teachers take on the role of socializing agent, more than in naturalistic contexts, where newcomers are transformed by or transform the existing community. The applications of socialization theory to SLA are principally in the realm of discourse and pragmatic development (Duff, [Language Socialization, Participation and Identity: Ethnographic Approaches](file:///index/chapterdoi/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_65), Volume 3).

**Sociocultural Theory**

Unlike the Language Identity and Language Socialization models described above, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) adopts the theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky (e.g., 1978) to second language studies, applies to any learning process, and connects sociolinguistic with psycholinguistic contexts and outcomes. It sees language as a tool that mediates between social interaction and the development of higher order mental processes, and attaches importance to the history of a present entity or process (Swain and Deters, 2007). It views second language development in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a sociocultural phenomenon linking the social/interactional with the cognitive. The ZPD is the domain of skills that learners lack but can acquire with assistance.

Several key notions have been introduced in SCT applied in SLA research. *Scaffolding* is one in which the interlocutor possessing expertise guides the novice through a series of interactions in which the expert gradually cedes and the novice takes on increasing responsibility. It occurs through social interaction, and includes modelling and training by the expert and observing and imitating by the novice. Gradually the novice becomes more adept, and that which began as an inter-mental, socially mediated activity becomes an intra-mental, cognitive developmental process. Another notion is *dynamic assessment*, which means systematic incorporation of the ZPD into classroom practice by evaluating what learners can do and how they react to instruction while teaching. The third notion worth mentioning is *concept-based instruction*, which encompasses phases such as verbal explanation of a concept in second language, materialization where the concept is represented visually, communicative activities ranging from tasks to scenarios, verbalization and internalization (Lantolf, 2011).

**Conversation Analysis**

Firth and Wagner’s call in 1996-97 for a more fully contextualized, emic perspective on second language learning has blossomed into a series of research projects using Conversation Analysis (CA) as a methodological tool. Researchers involved in this new thrust claim that CA is the most effective means for studying moment-by-moment second language development. Evolving from ethnomethodology, CA re-envisions mental processes as socially shared in interaction and takes unmotivated looking in naturally occurring data (e.g., Schegloff, 1991). This body of research has by and large focused on classroom discourse and interaction, with a few exceptions (see also Mori and Zuengler, [Conversation Analysis and Talk-in-interaction in Classrooms](file:///index/chapterdoi/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_58), Volume 3).

*The Modern Language Journal*, in 2004, devoted a special issue (Volume 88, Issue 4) to a series of articles using CA for second language research, and included several essays taking a critical perspective on the pros and cons of this line of research endeavour. Mondada and Pekarek Doehler characterized their approach as sociointeractionist, and asserted that CA as a research tool enables the observation of task (re)organization by teachers and students in a French language class. Young and Miller showed how a CA analysis of ESL writing conferences affords a view of participation frameworks that change over time for the learner. Mori highlighted learners’ orientation to learning opportunities in a Japanese language class. Kasper’s CA analysis of a learner of German in conversation partner speech showed how participant statuses were made relevant through the interactions between the expert and the novice. Markee put forth the notion of ‘Zones of Interactional Transition’ to designate talk that occurs at the boundaries of speech exchange systems through CA analysis. Agnes He’s piece used Chinese heritage language classrooms as the site for her research. She proposed that a language socialization perspective, rather than CA, may lend increased insights into the process of language learning.

Of critical importance among the essays in the special edition were the four commentaries by applied linguists Susan Gass, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Joan Kelly Hall, and Johannes Wagner. Each assessed the role played by CA while taking to task some specific claims made by the individual papers in the collection. As in the 1997 MLJ debate, Gass, from a psycholinguistic perspective, continued to question how CA could demonstrate acquisition. Larsen-Freeman, who espoused a chaos/complexity perspective on SLA, questioned the CA conception of *emic* in these studies. Hall’s work was firmly rooted in a Vygotskyan sociocultural perspective, and thus while noting the pros of CA, also outlined what SCT can offer to second language development. Wagner, the sole CA representative of the group, reasserted his stance that classroom discourse may not be the best site for studying language learning. He stated: “the real potential for a social approach to language learning lies outside the classroom in the activities of ordinary bilingual social life.” (p. 615).

**Work in Progress**

Research in progress on the interface of discourse and second language learning has carried on an ongoing cognitive-social debate on ontology, epistemology and methodology. The 2007 focus issue of MLJ (Volume 91, Issue Supplement s1), presented by Sally Magnan as her last issue of editorship, continued the debate and explored how much impact Firth and Wagner (1997) has made on the fields of SLA and foreign language pedagogy.

In the focus issue, Larsen-Freeman classified the SLA studies that reacted to Firth and Wagner (1997) into supporting, partially agreeing or mostly disagreeing ones. With the help of a table manifesting a binary contrast between cognitive and social sides, she convincingly argued that the two groups are investigating different data and questions. Although Gass, Lee and Roots would disagree, Larsen-Freeman proposed reconciling the differences. She provided three options: (a) each side do research in its own direction; (b) empirical data be used to show how the two sides are related; and (c) a large frame encompassing different approaches be sought to accommodate the two sides.

While commenting on the reactions to their 1997 article, Firth and Wagner discussed its conceptual, theoretical and methodological impact. To address the criticism involving evidence of language development, they contended that meticulous transcripts of recordings of natural conversational interactions could reveal learning-in-action without leaning on the cognitive constructs of language learning. They also offered a synopsis of three socially oriented approaches that developed between 1997-2007: Sociocultural theory, constructivism that is well established in educational research, and a social interactional approach built on communities of practice.

From the social perspective, Swain and Deters acknowledged continuous growth in SLA research scrutinizing contextual factors, human agency and multifaceted identities. They elaborated on how four major approaches to SLA research, sociocultural theory, situated learning, post-structural theories and dialogism, have provided alternative interpretations of language learning. They asserted that second language acquisition needs to be understood from both etic and emic perspectives.

Also advocating a social orientation, Tarone discussed a sociolinguistic model of SLA that integrates social factors, attention and linguistic forms (e.g., Preston, 2002). This model illuminates contextual factors that cause variation in second language use, choice, perception, development and identity. A growing interest related to this can be seen in increasing research on pragmatic variation in second language contexts (see Félix-Brasdefer and Koike, 2012).

When discussing the new directions in SLA, Mori suggested the possibility of combining CA with other theoretical frameworks such as SCT. CA researchers consider both data-external environmental and data-internal sequential contexts, disclose participants’ particular identities by analyzing how they construct talk and respond to others’ talk moment-by-moment, and provide emic perspectives through meticulous observation of the initiation, projection, construction, completion and termination of conversational turns. Although CA cannot effectively address SLA concerns about language learning, its research findings about second language conversations can inform textbook writers, second language learners and second language teachers.

Block noted an increase in socially oriented SLA research employing a postmodern model to examine the relationship between learner identities and second language acquisition. This research has demonstrated that in naturalistic, classroom or study abroad contexts, second language learners’ access and willingness to engage in second language social networks play a crucial role in their success. Their identity constrains and is constrained by social interaction. The complexity and mutability of learner identity can account for some challenges in ideally linear and systematic SLA research.

Lantolf and Johnson discussed the implications of the social orientation of SLA for educational praxis. They highlighted the necessity of bringing human agency into the understanding of internalization in classroom discourse. They proposed that language and culture be (re)unified and that second language instruction be (re)situated in concrete communicative activities designed for conceptual understanding in context. Concept-based instruction can build second language learners’ capacity to adjust and function in a second language and also improve second language teachers’ critical thinking ability about second language classroom discourse and praxis.

Echoing Lantolf and Johnson’s viewpoints, Freeman moved the refocusing of second language teaching on meaning-driven classroom activities and the reshaping of learner and teacher identity. To make his point, Freeman discussed different teaching methods and SLA constructs to display paradigm shifts in the history and the effect of Firth and Wagner (1997) on pedagogy.

Considering the global multilingual reality, Kramsch and Whiteside examined the change in the interpretation of three primary SLA concepts challenged by Firth and Wagner (1997): *native speaker, interlanguage* and *the language learner*. They maintained that the three notions should be broadened because their socially relative and discursive dimensions have been revealed.

Unlike Kramsch and Whiteside, Canagarajah questioned the use of those three terms against the backdrop of multilingual communities speaking lingua franca English (LFE). Since LFE is intersubjectively constructed and discursively negotiated by participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, one form that is inappropriate or unintelligible in one context might turn out to be acceptable and understandable in another. The fluidity and hybridity of LFE indicates the invalidity of the three structuralist notions and leads to the birth of unique ways to assess LFE speakers in areas of interaction strategies, situated performance, communicative repertoire and sociolinguistic sensitivity. Canagarajah proposed a practice-based model to illustrate the “multimodal, multisensory, multilateral, and, therefore, multidimensional” features of language acquisition (p. 923).

Lafford highlighted the discursive approaches that have contributed to the undertaking of the reconceptualization of SLA, providing in-depth discussion on the topics, and describing the evolution of SLA. She confirmed the positive impact of Firth and Wagner (1997) on SLA scholars’ awareness of contextual factors, emic sensitivity and expansion of database, despite the continuous existence of a cognitive-social bifurcation. Due to the complexity of SLA that involves learners’ mind, innate qualities and surrounding social context, efforts have been and will continue to be made to increase the compatibility of cognitive and social lines, create intersection between them and integrate both perspectives into a more inclusive approach beyond the boundaries.

Though not discussed in this focus issue, another attempt toward the integration of cognitive and social lines of thoughts was the socio-cognitive approach (e.g., Atkinson, 2002). This approach takes an ecological perspective to integrate cognitive and social perspectives. It views language as a tool for social action and learning as developing alignment with the environment. It adopts multimodal interaction analysis emphasizing particularity, process, integrativeness, variation, experience, extended cognition and action as interaction. This approach has been employed by only a handful of empirical SLA studies and intercultural pragmatics research (e.g., Kecskes, 2014). It needs to be further explored for its applicability and effectiveness.

Similar to Canagarajah, Young (2009) proposed Practice Theory to examine the verbal, nonverbal and interactional resources that participants deploy in practice and the relationship between the practice, its generic history and the participants’ personal histories. From this perspective, language learning indicates and is indicated by the change in learners’ linguistic knowledge and their participation in discursive practices. In-depth analysis of language learning requires an understanding of how and why a participant interacts in a social context.

Another strand of qualitative research employs corpus linguistic approaches to SLA to investigate second language samples collected in natural contexts. In the special issue (Volume 97, S1) of the 2013 MLJ, Hasko anticipated a long-lasting engagement between learner corpora and SLA owing to their mutually informative relationship. Zhang and Lu revealed inter- and intra-individual variability in four learners’ development in Chinese classifier use through qualitative description after providing quantitative analysis. Examining contextual factors is important in such cases because it can enhance our understanding of second language development.

A brief glance at the 2014 program of the conference of AAAL shows us that current research using qualitative methodologies are highlighted. Interesting ongoing research focuses on plurilingualism in foreign language education (e.g., Moore, 2006). This line of research has demonstrated that bi/plurilinguals showed enhanced language awareness, built knowledge in context and achieved pluricultural competence despite variable access to plurilingual repertoires. Their language proficiency can be assessed in non-traditional, context-based ways with the premise that translanguaging is a norm.

The year 2014 witnessed the 19th International Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning (P & LL). Research featured at this biannual conference shed light on the subject of second language pragmatic development in various discourses including study abroad, medical and political settings. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were showcased for second language pragmatics research.

**Problems and Difficulties**

The main problems with applying discourse analysis to second language learning revolve around methodological, theoretical, and epistemological issues. The models and theories discussed above in current major contributions have stemmed from the epistemological question of what counts as evidence of second language development. An outgrowth of this problem is that of ascertaining the most effective means of studying discourse to determine how second language learning best takes place. As we have seen in the above discussion, there has been a strong move toward considering contingent, contextual factors for unpredictable outcomes, connecting emic perspectives on discourse to the study of SLA, and expanding SLA research to uninstructed and multilingual settings.

A major difficulty is the issue of documenting actual second language learning. Gass and Larsen-Freeman took up this specific argument in their commentaries on the 2004 MLJ articles. While CA can trace a learner’s participation in the learning process, this is not the same as showing that acquisition has taken place. Although Mondada and Pekarek Doehler and Young and Miller tried to elucidate second language learning through CA analysis, Agnes He acknowledged that CA is not designed to document second language acquisition.

Indeed, the existing problem with this current research thread using CA to investigate SLA is that the studies fall short of demonstrating language acquisition. Moreover, as Larsen-Freeman pointed out, the conception of CA as emic is not the same as what is considered emic in other qualitative approaches (e.g., ethnography of speaking or interactional sociolinguistic perspectives). Wagner’s suggestion that we explore contexts of lingua franca use as rich sites for study is a good one. Those contexts should also include non-Western communities of practice where learners choose to speak English as a lingua franca of practice outside of the classroom even though they share a native language (e.g., Zhu, 2014).

ES and IS are highly contextualized emic methodologies, which have lent insights into the nagging questions of how best to view language acquisition as well as use. Although their usefulness for studying second language development has long been overlooked, they might rise to prominence because they would work better than current popular discursive approaches to SLA, such as CA, for longitudinal studies. It has been argued that longitudinal studies can disclose second language development over time more accurately and effectively (e.g., Duff and Talmy, 2011).

**Future Directions**

Highly contextualized, emic approaches to applied linguistics research are increasingly critical in current analyses of spoken and digital discourse. Novice language users would benefit from knowledge of what members of discourse communities successfully do in various contexts. Such heterogeneous, multilingual, and transnational contexts include: multilingual language practices (e.g., code switching and translanguaging); sensitivity to the constraints of the sociolinguistic variables (e.g., gender, social distance, and social status) in a second language; and sensitivity to domains of usage (e.g., workplace, education, social interaction, computer-mediated communication, and new media). In analyses of the knowledge, critical discourse analysis is and will continue to be an important thrust, since issues of power and dominance necessarily come into play (see also Rogers, [Critical Discourse Analysis in Education](file:///index/chapterdoi/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_61), Volume 3). 1

Discursive approaches to SLA are moving toward post-structuralism and multi-directions due to transnationalization and the growth of multilingualism, as evidenced by the blossoming alternative approaches to SLA mentioned above. SLA scholars need a comprehensive theory to connect individual learners with the large social world, and give equal weight to etic and emic perspectives. Furthermore, SLA theory should be able to account for human agency, learners’ fluid and hybrid subjectivities, contingent and unanticipated second language development, and nonlinear trajectory of the evolution of social participation in practice-based longitudinal studies. To handle the complexity of SLA data and the ever-changing world, it is not difficult to envision the integration of two approaches such as CA and discursive psychology, CA and SCT, or chaos theory and sociocognitive approaches. Situated learning theory has been argued to be compatible with identity theory, practice theory and language socialization. The compatibility of different approaches might eventually lead the way to an ecological SLA theory where cognitive and social sides converge to elucidate second language learners’ discursive practice within and beyond the time-space horizon of the practice.

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**Footnotes**

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| 1 | For a thorough overview of Critical Discourse Analysis, see Fairclough (1995). |