

A Sociocultural Perspective on Second Language Teacher Education

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A sociocultural perspective on human learning broadens the way we think about:

- teacher learning - teachers as learners of teaching
- language - language as social practice
- language teaching - teaching as dialogic mediation
- macro-structures within the L2 teaching profession
- professional development - inquiry-based approaches

Not a methodology or an approach for how to 'do' L2 teacher education, but rather, a theoretical framework for how to think about what we do in L2 teacher education

Thinking in Concepts: Disciplinary Knowledge & Concept Development

Sharkey, J. (2003). Dialogues around "Social identity, investment, and language learning," by B. Norton. In J. Sharkey and K.E. Johnson (Eds.). *TESOL Quarterly dialogues: Rethinking issues of language, culture, and power* (pp. 56-60) Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Excerpt 1: "Dash away, dash away, dash away all!"

Ivan, a fifteen-year old immigrant from Russian, is a sophomore in a U.S. public high school. He has been in the United States for three years. A handsome young man, with poise beyond his years, he does construction work with his father after school and on weekends. His passion for aeronautics is evidenced by his membership in the civil air patrol and the ease with which he talks about the capabilities and specifications of the latest Russian fighter jets.

December in the ESL room means a heavy dose of US cultural literacy through a multitude of Christmas activities: making ornaments, decorating the classroom tree, and participating in the ESL students' Christmas production. This year, each student was given a 16x20 inch page from a coloring book version of the Clement Clarke Moore poem, "A Visit from St. Nicolas" popularly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Each student was given a picture to color and must memorize the line of verse that accompanies it. The final production will be a row of ESL students (ages fourteen to nineteen) holding up their colored pages and saying their lines at the appropriate time.

Ivan is given a picture of Santa leading his reindeer and shouting, "Now dash away, dash away, dash away all!" He sees this task as childish but he can't explicitly say this to his teachers. Instead, he demonstrates his resistance by coloring the reindeer with hot pink heads, fluorescent yellow collars, and bright purple antlers, a Las Vegas nightclub interpretation of Santa's flight crew. Tom, the social studies ESL teacher, shakes his head upon seeing Ivan's work and says, "I don't know, Ivan. I think you'll have to re-do that." Later, Susan, the head ESL teacher, tells me that Ivan is a nice guy but a poor student. She voices her concern over what she perceives as his refusal to improve his English. She interprets his reindeer artistry as another example of his negative attitude

Excerpt 2: "The Social Construction of Identity"

In her thought-provoking article, Bonny Norton challenges prevailing theories of second language acquisition, particularly in how those theories have ignored the social identity of the learner and the role of power in social interactions between native and non-native speakers. She advocates replacing the notion of motivation, which tends to overemphasize learners as fixed, ahistorical, decontextualized entities, with the notion of investment, which better "capture[s] the complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it". The theoretical concepts of subjectivity and subject positioning come alive in Bonny's longitudinal study of the language learning experiences of a small group of immigrant women in Canada. In her article, Bonny analyzes the experiences of Martina, from Czechoslovakia and Eva, from Poland, and demonstrates how these women struggle against their marginalized positions as nonnative speakers of English, and claim the right to speak, drawing strength from their social identities as mothers and/or professionals.

Excerpt 3: "Subjectivity" and "Subject Positioning"

What does this have to do with students like Ivan? During the 1998-99 school year, I worked as volunteer tutor in the ESL room at a US public high school. I got to know students like Ivan over months of working with them, helping them with a variety of assignments, from writing essays for English class and completing college applications to finishing up science lab reports and checking grammar exercises in their ESL textbooks. Bonny's article had a tremendous influence on my experience at the high school. The concept of subjectivity and subject positioning led to questions like "Who are students allowed to be in this classroom?" and "How might this positioning of students affect their language learning?" I asked these questions as a teacher, and I thought about these questions in order to understand how teaching positions students.

Let's go back to Ivan for a minute. Outside of the high school he is a young man planning for his future as a jet pilot, actively involved in community service and contributing to the financial status of his family. Standing up in front of 2000 fellow high school students, with a page from a coloring book, and shouting out "dash away, dash away, dash away all!" contradicts his image of himself. It is not an

image he wants to project to the high school community. He rejects the subject position of child that this Christmas production offers him and subverts his participation by coloring the reindeer a combination of shocking hues. He wins. His teachers decide his coloring is not appropriate and Ivan won't be participating in the activity. He loses, too, for now his teachers use this behavior to label him an unmotivated English language learner.

Again, I think about my own teaching: what subject positions are available to students in my classroom? This is not a question I asked myself before reading Bonny's article. The combination of reading Bonny's article and trying to bring issues of identity into my teaching, helped me ask different kinds of questions about language learners and language learning.

Teaching as Dialogic Mediation

Johnson, K.E. (1999). *Understanding language teaching: Reasoning in action*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Excerpt 1: Ken – 4th/5th content-based ESL science – Why Bugs Have Color?

Now, an insect (but I called on Chuan), an insect, that's colored like that because of the flower that it's on, what would that be called? What's the reason that that insect is that color? Phan?

S1: Camouflage

K: Camouflage, that's the first one, cam-ou-flage, that's the first one and the camouflage, as you know, is coloring for protection, if you were a bird flying around would you be able to see that easily?

Ss: No

K: But what about that one? Now, was I, mother nature making a big mistake making a bug that color? Look is that hard to see?

Ss: No

K: So why do you think this bug is this bright color walking around on a green piece of grass? What do you think?

S2: Because maybe like some grasses are like light green? So something colored, so that's kind of light, so...

K: Does this look like it's kind of light?

S2: Hum, to me it does

K: This, is it hard to see this bug on this green piece of grass or easy to see him?

S2: Easy

K: If you were a bird flying around which of these two insects would you see real fast?

S2: Uhm...the, the one on the green grass.

K: The one on the green grass. Now, it might be that there's some lighter colored grass but this particular bug doesn't have colors for that reason. Who can think of another reason? He's so bright, he's so easy to see.

Ken – Stimulated Recall

We had talked about the concept of camouflage the day before so that's why he [S2] said that. But now, I'm introducing the next reason, and I'm trying to contrast it with camouflage. And I'm about to introduce the next reason, advertising, but he still is thinking that I'm talking about camouflage. He even tries to say it's an example of camouflage, because he knows what that means, so he thinks up a reason, something about some grasses are light green, so even here, he's trying to fit this new example into the first reason. I'm trying to help him see that this insect is easy to see, it's not camouflage, so I'm trying to walk him through his own logic, but he doesn't seem to get it.

Macro-structures and the L2 Teaching Profession

Johnson, K.E., Jordan, S.R., & Poehner, M.E. (2005) The TOEFL Trump Card: An Investigation of Test Impact in an ESL Classroom. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: An International Journal*, 2 (2), 71-94

Excerpt 1: Constructing a Student: The case of Joon

M: She's an odd one because uh that particular student was...last semester *she didn't do very well* in the Reading II and all the Level II classes and *we were basically gonna make her repeat the whole thing* and then *she turned up with this really good TOEFL score*, which amazed everybody. So because she got the TOEFL score, *she, in a sense was in charge of her own promotion*.

R: mm hm

M: and she moved up to Level 3 – but *we tried to talk her out of going to 3 but she was sure she needed to go to Level 3*.

R: mm hm do you think it was, it was a mistake for her to move up to Level 3?

M: No, no, I think it's exactly what she needed, but *I, I felt that as teachers living with her for a whole semester, grading exam after exam, each exam confirming the idea that she really wasn't doing well*

R: mm hm (cont.)

M: and then suddenly having her do well on the TOEFL, which is even more unusual. Um, it-it-it's in a way it's to her credit as well as *sort of humbling to us, to, to realize we really don't know how much English she knows despite all the data we collected all semester*

M: She's not that precise yet, but, but it did amaze me she did well on the TOEFL and it did sort of uh *disappoint me in myself that I wasn't able to see that* 'cause I can usually, I usually think that where the student's at again and when they don't do well, we know that well, they're not doing their best work

R: mm hm

M: now here I am thinking that she was doing her best work and it wasn't very good and then *she proved me wrong. You'd think I'd be able to after all this time. You'd think listening to foreign student questions, I'd be able to put it together but she's so convoluted*.

Excerpt 2: *Constructing a Student: The case of Noelle*

[Interview w/ Mark]

M: Noelle is enthusiastic but she also *does so many things without thinking* and has a tendency *to shoot from the hip*. She is very outgoing and participates actively in class - so much so that *sometimes she talks almost the entire class*. She has American roommates and spends a good deal of time watching American television and movies, and just socializing with her American friends. *She very confident in her ability to speak English. She's probably the most fluent student in this class.*

M: She relies on *a kind of intuition* when she is speaking. So, I think when Noelle talks to native speakers, she does learn a lot of English, but um I think *it's dormitory English instead of TOEFL English*.

[Interview w/ Noelle]

N: I have *good grades in all of my English classes* and *I do really, really well* but *I still got a low score on the TOEFL*. The grammar scares me a lot. It's the worst part of me. *I am awful at grammar but I am very good at speaking*.

N: The TOEFL is *just full of tricks, the whole TOEFL is a trick. You can use English really well, like me and still get a low score on the TOEFL*. But I need a higher TOEFL score to get into university and if I don't, I think I'll just go back to Cypress. *I think my English is good but I guess it's not good enough*.

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