

How Does Sociolinguistic Theory Contribute to Insights About Second Language Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Two Empirical Studies

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Abstract

This paper investigates how sociolinguistic theory can contribute to insights about second language learning - a field that is traditionally viewed as a branch of cognitive science within which social factors did not feature at the forefront for a long time. It discusses potential insights that can be gained by adopting a second language socialization approach combined with communities of practice theory to provide a unit of analysis. A comparative analysis of two studies within this framework sheds light on the limitations of a solely cognitive enquiry, particularly when conceptualizing the learner and the learning process, as well as the learning context and the role of culture. Furthermore, the potential that lies in extending the unit of analysis from communities of practice to individual networks of practice is investigated - a promising recent development within the field - as exemplified by one of the studies. The paper concludes with a critical evaluation of the discussed matters with the aim of establishing whether they can count as valid contributions to the field regarding our understandings of learning, theory building, and pedagogy and ultimately addresses the question of the nature of the contributory role of sociolinguistic theory. It argues that in order to do the advocated expanded view justice, the field of second language acquisition will have to allow for sociolinguistic perspectives to find their adequate position. Ideally social and cognitive perspectives should not be seen as competing against but rather complementing each other. The paper therefore argues that the social should take on a formative rather than just supportive role within the field, thus challenging the continuous dominance of cognitive oriented second language acquisition research.

Keywords: second language learning, sociolinguistic theory, second language socialization, communities of practice, individual networks of practice

Introduction

Within the field of second language learning, social factors did not feature at the forefront for a long time. Traditionally viewed as a branch of cognitive science (Doughty & Long, 2003) where learning is predominantly seen as “a matter of change in an individual’s internal mental state” (p. 4), it was not until the mid-1990s that work investigating the social dimension of second language learning gradually started to come to the fore and gained prominence. This

process has opened the field to much controversy, tension and debate making it ever more difficult to conceptualize what exactly we mean by the term second language learning. It is within this social-cognitive debate that this paper is positioned, arguing that both positions follow different ontologies, epistemologies, and research traditions which inevitably means that they also conceptualize and operationalize learning differently. Thus, an open mind and a holistic outlook are prerequisites for seeing, understanding and valuing the contribution of a social enquiry into how languages are learned. Ideally social and cognitive perspectives should not be seen as competing against but rather complementing each other.

Focusing on sociolinguistic perspectives on second language learning, this paper discusses potential insights that can be gained by adopting a language socialization approach combined with communities of practice theory to provide a unit of analysis. A comparative analysis of two studies within this framework sheds light on the limitations of a solely cognitive enquiry, in particular when conceptualizing the learner and the learning process, as well as the learning context and the role of culture. Furthermore, the potential that lies in extending the unit of analysis from communities of practice to individual networks of practice is investigated - a promising recent development within the field - as exemplified by one of the studies. The notion of what constitutes a contribution is vital to the discussion and therefore the paper concludes with a critical evaluation of the discussed matters with the aim of establishing whether they can count as valid contributions to the field regarding our understandings of learning, theory building, and pedagogy. Ultimately the question of the nature of the contributory role of sociolinguistic theory - whether it takes on or is allowed to take on a supportive or formative role - is addressed with the aim of sketching a possible way forward.

The term SLA (Second Language Acquisition) will be used to refer to the field and discipline and the term second language (L2) learning to refer to the process of learning additional languages, that is, the object of the inquiry itself. No distinction will be made between acquisition and learning.

1. Second Language Learning Conceptualized

On a rather general level, second language learning can be defined as the acquisition of any language after the successful acquisition of the first language (or languages). The aim of the scholarly field of inquiry is, broadly speaking, to account for how this process happens and as

“much current SLA research and theorizing shares a strongly cognitive orientation [...] the focus is firmly on identifying the nature and sources of the underlying L2 knowledge system, and on explaining developmental success and failure” (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 4). In other words, emphasis is put on describing learners’ competence – though what is meant by competence is not a clear-cut case – using learner language as primary data. However, the question is whether a predominantly cognitive view can do justice to the complex phenomenon of second language acquisition and what sociolinguistic theory has to offer to the field.

1.1 A Solely Cognitive Endeavour?

After a period of influence by Behaviourism (conceptualizing second language acquisition mainly in terms of the formation of habits characterised by mimicry and memorization), theories developed in cognitive psychology became extremely influential in shaping our insights into second language learning. This went alongside the impact of Chomsky’s formalistic and context free paradigm for linguistics, which puts grammatical competence at its heart (Firth & Wagner, 1997). As a result, the field of SLA developed along a rather narrow line of inquiry, mainly concerned with the acquisition of morphosyntactic features, trying to understand L2 acquisition within what Block (2003) has referred to as the ‘Input-Interaction-Output’ model. However, growing discontent with this development led to heavy criticism and the voices requesting a more sociolinguistic perspective of SLA became increasingly louder. This was sparked in particular by Firth and Wagner’s (1997) call for a reconceptualization of the field which resulted in the well documented dispute between cognitive and socially oriented SLA, for instance in the two special issues of the *Modern Language Journal* (Magan 1997; 2007). Examples of the controversy between the two perspectives are numerous. In their analysis of the debate, Zuengler and Miller (2006) structure it in terms of two major topics: L2 use versus L2 acquisition on the one hand, and the controversy in theory construction between positivist and relativist¹ on the other hand, pointing out the discrepancy between the underlying ontologies and epistemologies. Particularly the latter is without doubt one of the central issues when trying to assess the value of a more socially oriented enquiry of the field as it can be argued that the roots of cognitive SLA researchers’ criticism of a social

¹ Researchers working within a socially oriented approach often define their epistemological stance as constructivist rather than relativist (Firth & Wagner, 2007).

enquiry into SLA lie “both in divergent epistemologies, resulting in an inability to comprehend the objects of research and results of the other paradigm, and in the type of empirical research conducted under sociocultural² approaches to SLA” (Veronique, 2013, p. 254). Through the ongoing debate, it has become ever more evident that it is no longer possible to consider second language learning from a solely cognitive perspective.

1.1 Towards a Sociolinguistic Perspective on SLA

Sociolinguistic theory seeks to describe “language use as a social phenomenon and, where possible, [...] attempts to establish causal links between language and society, pursuing the complementary question of what language contributes to making community possible and how communities shape their languages by using them” (Coulmas, 1997, p. 2). A wide body of research and literature has been devoted to the pursuit of these aims resulting in multiple lines of enquiry. This heterogeneity is also reflected in sociolinguistic SLA. Coupland (2001) suggests differentiating between three types of sociolinguistics or social theory, each with its own assumptions, emphases and research methods: the social structure perspective, the social action perspective, and the integrationist perspective. Type 1 works with the assumption that “society has fixed structures which constrain individual action” (p. 3) and is therefore interested in the analysis of social structure and stratification on a macro-level, particularly in relation to the quantification of linguistic features. Type 2 employs a radically different ‘bottom up’ perspective in proposing that “social life and our entire experience of society is best seen as structured through local actions and practices” (p. 2) and has the examination of discourse and interaction at its heart emphasizing social and individual agency at the micro level. Type 3 tries to reconcile the dualism of Type 1 and Type 2 by viewing “society construed as a set of observable individual behaviours” (p. 3) examining, for example, how socio-political contexts influence discourse and how these structures are disputed and modified through discourse.

Within sociolinguistic approaches to SLA, the focus shifts away from the individual mind of the learner and the language system towards the social and interactional context in which language acquisition takes place, trying to understand which role the social context and social factors play in the co-construction of both linguistic knowledge and identity. Scholarly work within all three types of sociolinguistic enquiry has been carried out in the field. However, these

² Here sociocultural SLA refers to the sociocultural paradigm per se, which includes sociolinguistic perspectives.

different strands of research that have developed are not necessarily isolated and discrete, but interact smoothly with each other (Veronique, 2013, p. 256) which is also the case in the two research papers the subsequent discussion is centred around as they employ a widely-used combination of a second language socialization framework and communities of practice theory.

The study of language socialization proposes the interdependence of linguistic and sociocultural development (Ochs, 1988), the premise being that novices in a community are socialized both to the language forms and, through language, to the values, behaviours, and practices of the community in which they live - socialization “through the use of language and socialization to use language” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 163). Within the framework of second language socialization (SLS), learning is understood from social, cultural, and political perspectives (Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003) with emphasis given to learners’ social actions (compare with Type 2 approach as discussed above). Seeking to comprehend how learners acquire specific socialization practices, language learning is viewed as socially situated in communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where newcomers usually learn from so called experts with the process of socialization expected to be a smooth process. However, the need to also account for the role that ideology and power play within the socialization process, instances when practices are not acquired or acquired differently from what was intended and when structures are challenged, resisted or changed, has been increasingly acknowledged (Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Zuengler & Cole, 2005). Hence requesting for the theory to go beyond a Type 2 to a Type 3 approach (Ellis, 2008). Much research has focused on the classroom setting as a CoP and the expert-novice interaction between teachers and learners. However, recently there has been a new development to extend the unit of analysis to the concept of individual network of practice (INoP) which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

2. New Perspectives: A Comparative Analysis of Two Studies

One of the main points of critique of studies conducted within a second language socialization framework is the fact that their principal focus is not on examining linguistic aspects of language and its acquisition, but rather on how learners develop knowledge of social practices and associated meanings. Due to this lack of any direct linguistic focus their relevance for SLA theory has often been questioned (Ellis, 2008). Indeed, such research can only be made

sense of if one is willing to adopt a much broader viewpoint on second language learning, involving notions of knowledge of culture such as “stances of morality or respect” as well as social knowledge, or “how certain types of language practices produce and reflect social stratification, hierarchy, and status marking” (Duff & Talmy, 2011, p. 95).

The following comparative analysis of two empirical studies will shed more light on what new perspectives can potentially offer once a broader outlook is employed. Unlike cognitive approaches to SLA where research activity is usually concerned with linguistic elements of learners’ mental grammars as independent systems, both studies put the learner as a social being at the centre and conceptualize L2 acquisition as a transformative process which goes far beyond the acquisition of grammatical features or the correct use of those. Moreover, the context and how this context might interact with the socialization process and language use are of primary interest to the researcher. Due to the richness of data and emergent themes in both studies it is not possible to satisfactorily discuss all aspects. Therefore, after a brief overview of both studies, the ways in which the learner and the learning process are conceptualized, as well as the notion of culture and how context and setting afford learning opportunities will be looked at in more depths as they constitute the most salient themes.

2.1 A Brief Overview of the Two Studies

Study 1

Nguyen and Kellogg’s study “*I Had a Stereotype That American Were Fat*”: *Becoming a Speaker of Culture in a Second Language* (2010) examines the socialization process of 19 adult learners of English in a sustained content-based class aiming to prepare and transition students for college-level classes in Honolulu, Hawaii. Most of the learners had recently come to the USA from Japan, Korea, and Macau and were intermediate/upper-intermediate users of English who met every day for 22 hours per week over a 16-week period. Two hours per week were spent in a computer lab where they could participate in online discussions which also continued outside of class. The study traced the students’ evolving understandings of the culturally rich word ‘*stereotype*’ over the course of one semester using discourse analysis of students’ asynchronous electronic postings (387 WebCT postings in total, with only 23 posted by the teacher including general course management messages) and writing assignments together with the teacher/researcher’s ethnographic observations; the premise being that L2 learning goes beyond

the acquisition of mere linguistic forms and also involves ways of thinking and behaving in new communities of practice. The goal was therefore to “understand how learning of meanings in an L2 is enabled by participation in social activities in which actions, stances, and identities are made relevant” (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2010, p. 56). Starting by reporting on students’ initial epistemic stances towards ‘*stereotypes*’, the study shows how their collaborative understanding changed during the course of the online discussions, and, how these changes were also reflected in subsequent discussions and essays during the term.

The study differs from other studies within a second language socialization framework in that it investigates the learning of a specific lexical item (the word ‘*stereotype*’) and in so doing responds to the criticism SLS studies are often confronted with, as mentioned above. The unit of analysis was the classroom including the virtual learning environment (VLE) that was embedded in normal classroom practice and used by the learners beyond that. In this sense, the extended classroom functioned as a CoP. However, the research moved beyond the expert-novice interaction often focused on in socialization practices within CoPs as emphasis was placed on peer-to-peer socialization. With a prime interest in the process of learning, rather than the product, the meaning negotiation between students at the micro level of social interaction is at the centre of the study. So, instead of being limited to the students’ mastery of the word’s form, the focus is on the contextualized emergence of language.

Study 2

In contrast, Zappa-Hollman and Duff’s study *Academic English Socialization Through Individual Networks of Practice* (2015) does not employ any linguistic focus per se. However, it extends the existing framework of CoP by introducing the notion of individual network of practice (INoP). This concept was developed in order to capture “the nature and significance of the various social relationships learners establish, and to examine their role in learners’ academic enculturation” drawing on Milroy’s social network theory and CoP theory. It “places the learner at the centre of the socialization process while simultaneously taking account of the other individuals (and communities) with whom the learner interacts and engages in linguistic and discursive practice”. Hence in so doing the unit of analysis moves beyond “the oral, face-to-face, or classroom-based manner that language socialization (LS) research has traditionally examined” (p. 334).

The article provides findings from the INoP analysis of three participants which were part of a longitudinal, qualitative, multiple-case study involving 22 Mexican students, examining their academic English socialization at a Canadian university. The study is striking in its richness and the different kinds of data that were collected - biographical and academic data, five to eight semi-structured 50 mins long interviews per participant, writing logs, tables containing information about key people in the participants' social network and other background information. This allowed the researcher to reconstruct the participants' INoPs and also provide a visual representation in the form of detailed network graphics, identifying clusters (social groups), nodes (key people), differentiating between uniplex nodes (linked to the participant in one capacity and multiplex nodes (linked to the participant in more than one capacity) and ties or connections (ranging from 'weaker/farther' to 'stronger/closer').

2.2 Spotlight on the Learner: Participant – Social Actor - Negotiator

In his critique of cognitive SLA, Pennycook (2001) remarks that “the learner has been cast as a one-dimensional acquisition device, as a sort of language learning machine” (p. 143). One significant feature of these two studies is that such notion is absent. The learners are by no means portrayed as passive subjects, but rather take centre stage with the spotlight put on their actions. For example their collaborative meaning making process in study 1 or their networking in study 2. This is particularly well illustrated in the latter through the visual representation of the three learners' INoPs, where each learner clearly features at the centre with the respective clusters, nodes, ties and connections linked to them. Instead of the cognitive architecture of their minds, the architecture of their social world, conceptualized through their complex networks, is what is of interest to the researcher and seen as being at least in part responsible for their language learning experience. It can be argued that the learner is seen as a multidimensional social agent involved in social interaction which implies that the “speaker is no longer someone who speaks, but someone who acts – that is, someone who acts *through* speaking and thus becomes a social actor” (Kern & Liddicoat cited in Veronique, 2013, p. 270, emphasis in original). Study 1 casts the light on the learner as negotiator, not only of cognitive understandings, but also of stance and identity, as Nguyen and Kellogg (2010) assert that “the students' understandings of the meaning of stereotype was not merely a cognitive state but also a reflection of being deeply situated in their social actions, as well as their social identity

construction vis-à-vis the target culture and the other participants in class” (p. 61). Such view inevitably results in a shift in focus in the way in which the learner’s cognitive activities are accounted for as it is rather the emergent nature of context-socially shared cognition which is under investigation, in stark contrast to the negotiation of meaning in cognitive SLA. The electronic postings witnessing students’ “delicate positioning [...] and alignment” resulting in that “students came to the collaborative understanding that stereotypes in general were not true” (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2010, p. 62) are prime examples for such situated cognition. Here L2 learning is understood from a social perspective and focuses, as Ortega (2009) points out, “on experience that is lived, made sense of, negotiated, contested and claimed by learners in their physical, interpersonal, social, cultural and historical context” (p. 218).

Another dimension of this can be seen in study 2 where the learners are portrayed as negotiators of complex social ties represented in their respective INoPs. The focus expands to the learner as language user in natural environments where their active engagement in interactional activity creates the affordances (or not) for language acquisition. Here success might be measured by increased effectiveness in interactions or even greater access to interactions, by positioning oneself successfully within their CoP or even more, an effective INoP. However, considering these issues of social access and relationality also challenges more traditional instructed Foreign Language Teaching to consider what happens outside the classroom walls. Educators and institutions are called to “help design systems that optimize students’ INoPs to provide as constructive and successful a learning experience as possible” (Zappa-Hollmann & Duff, 2015, p. 362).

2.3 Language Learning as Participation: A Transformative Process

Adopting the view of the learner as participant/negotiator/social actor undoubtedly influences the way in which the learning process is accounted for. For example, the interactions in study 1 are not conceptualized in terms of functioning as a mere source of input as is common in cognitive approaches, but as a way by which the learners position themselves within their surroundings and in turn shape them. The vivid discussions and electronic postings are not looked at from an ‘Input-Interaction-Output’ model perspective prevalent in cognitive approaches focusing on how the learner’s mental state changes. Or in other words, the learning process is not conceptualized as moving along a continuum from a non-native speaker position

towards a native speaker ideal judged by the development of the learners' interlanguage. Although initially the new linguistic item '*stereotype*' is introduced by providing dictionary definitions, the learning process goes far beyond acquiring its referential meaning or establishing the theoretical ability of piecing linguistic particles together or differentiate between different forms, etc. As well as engaging in personal reflexivity, in the peer-to-peer interactions the learners not only actively positioned themselves towards one another, but also towards target norms and practices, which in turn allowed them to deconstruct existing stereotypes, to question and challenge them. Duff (2007) found that SLS "does not necessarily lead to the reproduction of existing cultural and discursive practices", but "can lead to variable outcomes" which in her view depends "on the agency and discernment" of the learners "regarding the practices they may wish to emulate and those they do not". Other outcomes could be "hybrid practices, identities, and values; the incomplete or partial appropriation of the L2 and status within the L2 community; or rejection of target norms and practices" (p. 311). This would also reiterate the points raised earlier when discussing SLS research as a Type 3 sociolinguistic approach and resonates with Ortega's (2009) view that "language learners are engaged in changing their worlds and therefore L2 learning is always transformative" (p. 98).

2.4 Context and Setting: Creating Learning Opportunities

One advantage of the smooth interaction of the different strands of research that developed within sociolinguistic SLA as mentioned earlier can be seen as allowing for greater flexibility in extending concepts by building upon existing theories. This will be particularly helpful when attempting to attain a clearer picture of the particularities of different contexts and language learning settings in order to optimize learning opportunities. Cognitive SLA usually operates a binary English as a second language/English as a foreign Language distinction with a set way of how to make attainment claims which can be argued does not do justice to the complexity of a 21st century globalised multilingual world. Defining the macro-social contexts and micro-sociolinguistic settings involved in L2 learning is paramount in understanding SLA as a socialization process (Veronique, 2013, p. 269). Different types of macro-contexts range from dominant L2 with learners typically being immigrant workers immersed in the language environment of the language they intend to learn, to external L2 where L2 learning takes place in a typical foreign language setting, to coexisting and institutional L2 where learners are speakers

in multilingual environments, and lastly minority L2 where speakers of the dominant language learn the minority language (Siegel, 2003, p. 178). Tarone and Liu (1995) point out that “in the field of SLA research we have tended to err by divorcing the study of the internal development of an interlanguage grammar from the study of the (external) social contexts in which the learner develops this grammar” (p.108). Operationalizing broad-brushed distinctions does indeed not allow for a more specific picture of the social context of the learner which is “too often viewed as unrelated to the internal cognitive process of L2 acquisition, and so, unworthy of comment” (p. 109). Context-sensitive studies such as the two studies compared here, can shed light upon the delicate relationship between internal and contextual forces. They also inform our understanding of how opportunities or affordances for learning are created and made use of. Particularly the INoP concept offers great possibilities to give more context and setting sensitive and specific accounts of learners’ second language socialization processes. It also leads us to further question the usefulness of the native speaker/non-native speaker distinction and the fallacy that languages are predominantly learned to interact with native speakers. The INoPs of the three learners for example show that most of the ties and connections were to other multilingual speakers of English as a lingua franca which then in turn raises the question which English should be promoted in materials or instructed learning settings and what the aim of language instruction is in general and whether this reflects the actual need of the particular learner.

2.5 Culture: More Than an ‘Add-on-Item’

The dichotomy of language and culture, in practice often proceduralised by teaching “four skills ‘plus culture’” (Kramsch 1993, p. 8), or culture as a ‘fifth skill’, as for example advocated by Tomalin (2008) is a common and established feature of language teaching around the world. Although the field has in recent years witnessed a ‘cultural turn’ (Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013, 2015) and concepts such as ‘cultural and intercultural awareness’, as well as ‘intercultural communicative competence’ have been widely discussed (see in particular the two special issues of *The Language Learning Journal*, 2013 and 2015), in many mainstream coursebooks. Culture is often still seen “as mere information conveyed by the language, not as a feature of the language itself”, which means that “cultural awareness becomes an educational objective in itself, separate from language” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 8). The way the word

'stereotype' is dealt with in study 1 overcomes this binary language/culture distinction as it moves from impersonal cross-cultural comparisons towards encouraging the learner to adopt a personal, reflective stance with the aim of 'becoming a speaker of culture'. This allows for interrelated notions, such as ideology, beliefs, and identity to be brought into the picture, thus promoting a critical and dynamic perspective on culture (Baker, 2015). Study 1 concludes that "the data show that the learning of a word's social and cultural meanings and how these meanings are related to one's own self is a complex process accomplished through social interaction" (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2010, p. 70).

3. From New Perspectives to Valuable Contributions

Throughout the discussion, it has become evident that sociolinguistic perspectives of SLA lead to an evaluation and reassessment of what might have traditionally been taken as the only way of conceptualizing L2 learning. What remains now is to assess the contributory value of the insights such new perspectives afford in terms of our understandings of learning, SLA theory, as well as pedagogy and practice. Although admitting that professional discourse is not likely to change, Larsen-Freeman (2015) made a case for second language acquisition to be re-coined as second language development in order to reflect a different way of thinking, one that would centre on the learner's point of view. The above analysis of emergent themes in the studies is certainly in support of such proposal.

3.1 Contributions to Our Understanding of Learning

Looking at second language learning from a socialization or INoP perspective challenges, enriches, and expands the way in which key constructs in SLA are conceptualized and learning is understood. One of the most salient contributions is certainly the fact that a social perspective on SLA offers alternatives for the learner-as-machine metaphor and the 'Input-Interaction-Output' model. Looking beyond such traditional abstract frameworks and models and employing instead a more contextually grounded and individual perspective of the learner moves our understanding of learning beyond seeking ways of optimizing input in order to activate universal cognitive processes, how to best utilize output as a source of input or the way learner errors should be treated. Learning is not conceptualized as a mental, but rather a social and collaborative phenomenon; it is "learning-in-action" (Ellis, 2014, p. 29). A social perspective also offers alternative views of what constitutes success which in turn would potentially impact on how L2

proficiency is measured and assessed in different L2 learning contexts, particularly if the native speaker ideal is taken out of the equation. Instead the actual need or lived and experienced reality of the individual learner within their INoPs could feature as what success is measured by or against.³

Furthermore, it can be argued that the INoP perspective put forward in the second study potentially adds a new dimension to what is currently referred to as individual learner differences in SLA, such as aptitude, motivation, personality, learning styles, learning strategies, anxiety, self-esteem, creativity, willingness to communicate, learner beliefs (Dörnyei, 2005). On the one hand, ‘learner networking’ could be added as a further variable to the list. On the other hand, social perspectives would also allow for existing variables to be looked at from a “person-in-context relational view” as put forward by Ushioda (2011, p. 12). She states that research on individual learner differences “concerns itself not with the unique characteristics of particular individuals” but instead “focuses on averages and aggregates that lump together people who share certain characteristics” resulting in a depersonalisation of learners “who are treated simply as abstract bundles of variables” (*ibid.*). A social perspective of individual learner differences can overcome these limitations and see them instead as organic processes shaped by the agency of the individual learner and their interactions with their complex and fluid network of social interactions. In addition, the uniplex/multiplex distinction in the nodes within a learner’s INoP could potentially provide a more context-sensitive account of a learner’s personality in addition to the extraversion/introversion dimension usually employed.

3.2 Contributions to SLA Theory

The arrival of social perspectives on SLA has opened the field to vivid discussions with regard to meta-theoretical and meta-methodological concerns. The debate around the positivist/constructivist dichotomy reminds us many times of the discussion around theory construction in the natural and social sciences in general, but just how nobody would question the existence of the latter and their importance in contributing to our knowledge about the world, the same can be argued to apply to sociolinguistic perspectives of language learning. The social world and language itself as part of this social world are far too complex to be captured solely by

³ For example, in another study drawing on social network theory, multilingual European scholars’ INoPs were tracked focusing on the consequences of their participation in relation to their success in publishing their scholarly work in English-medium journals (Lillis & Curry in Zappa-Hollmann, & Duff, 2015)).

work conducted within a positivist paradigm producing quantifiable data. Through investigating language as a social phenomenon, it becomes evident how partial the picture of L2 acquisition is that cognitive explanations offer. Constructivist enquiries are needed to provide ways in finding underlying patterns, context-sensitive knowledge and for grasping notions and phenomena such as culture, ideologies, beliefs, identities which as we have seen cannot be treated as fixed independent variables in a system but are rather complex, co-constructed and fluid in nature and relative to the values of the individual learner and communities.

As Lightbown and Spada (2013) point out “general theory of second language acquisition needs to account for language acquisition by learners with a variety of characteristics in a variety of contexts” (p. 104). An emphasis on the culturally-specific nature of development, and the social context has potential to offer explanations for some fundamental questions in SLA, including for example, different rates and outcomes. Undoubtedly there is a need to account for both – differential outcomes as well as universals in L2 acquisition. Ortega (2009) asserts that “attempts to understand L2 acquisition would be incomplete [...] if we did not consider how social forces also shape what gets (and does not get) acquired, and why” (p. 9).

3.3 Contributions to Pedagogy and Practice

For mainstream second language teaching the task at hand now is to find possible interactions with both accounts of SLA. In instructed L2 settings, pedagogy and practice are on the one hand challenged to allow for language socialization to take place, to promote agency and increase learner autonomy. On the other hand, the language socialization perspective as employed in the studies that have been discussed moves away from the assumption that learning is restricted to the classroom and sheds new light on what is happening outside the classroom in the learners’ natural environments. It also explores collaboration within virtual learning possibilities, thus promoting technology-enhanced language learning.

The latter is exemplified in an inspiring way through the methodology used in the first study which incorporates the effective use of a VLE into the data collection – in this case as extension of an instructed setting which is commonplace for instance in higher education settings where VLEs are not only used for administrative purposes but their use extends to being a platform for seminar style discussions. Such creative way of incorporating and capitalizing upon new technologies in an instructed L2 learning context opens up avenues for second language

learning and teaching. There has been a significant research effort highlighting the benefits of VLEs and social network sites for language learning, particularly concerning informal language learning and practice, group cohesion, learner collaboration, and increasing learner agency (*e.g.*, Merlin, 2012; Mills, 2011; Toetenel, 2014).

Within a more traditional classroom setting, the approach provides practitioners with a potential framework for interpreting and considering learner practices, behaviours, and attitudes. Translated into classroom practice as well as more general principles for teaching, this promotes a view of learning as actively shaped through individual meaning-making and reflexivity which would need to be catered for. Moreover, instead of focusing practitioners' attention on generalised types of learners, it urges them to understand learners in the classroom as individuals with particular identities, histories, goals and motives and can for example offer relevant insights in what might otherwise be judged as non-responsive or resistant (Bayley & Langman, 2011). In return, such insights can then feed back into practice and pedagogy and aid a stronger bottom-up theory building.

The proposed theory expansion under the rubric 'individual differences' would also have an effect on pedagogy and practice and could take for instance the form of raising both learners' and teachers' awareness of learners' INoPs with the aim of exploiting them for the learning process, thereby increasing learning opportunities as well as learner autonomy. The importance of networking skills is repeatedly emphasized, particularly in higher education settings as well as in professional development. With regard to L2 learning this could add another dimension to learner strategies by looking at how 'networking strategies' could be fostered in order to increase a learner's access to language exchanges that promote L2 acquisition and gains in language proficiency.

Conclusion

This paper started with offering some definitions of learning, second language acquisition and the goal of SLA, all more aligned with traditional cognitive perceptions. In light of the discussion, it seems appropriate to acknowledge their limitations and therefore seek to expand those. Ortega (2009) does the latter by defining SLA as

... the scholarly field of inquiry that investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first, during late childhood, adolescence or adulthood, and once the first language

or languages have been acquired. It encompasses the study of naturalistic and formal language acquisition in second, foreign and heritage learning contexts. It seeks to understand universal, individual and social forces that influence what gets acquired, how fast, and how well, by different people under different learning circumstances (p. 10).

In order to do such expanded view justice, the field of SLA will have to allow for sociolinguistic perspectives to find their adequate position. The argument put forward in this paper would clearly support the social to take on a formative rather than just supportive role and challenges the continuous dominance of cognitive oriented SLA research, which can be witnessed in metaphors such as “the “cake” of SLA is cognitive, while its “icing” is the social” (Sharwood Smith cited in Zuengler & Cole 2006, p. 36). In consideration of the discussion, it is fair to say that the contribution of the social goes beyond just being the “icing”. A cake is still a cake, even without icing and can be perfectly enjoyed without it, whereas it is evident that a comprehensive SLA theory cannot be considered complete without insights gained from social enquiries into the field. Inevitably a new metaphor is needed – one could replace the cake/icing with a pancake that needs to be baked on both sides in order to be enjoyed or a coin that has two different looking sides but still constitutes a single whole. Such way of thinking would support the claim that both – psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic theory - contribute equally to our insights about second language learning or development and argue for an integrative perspective of SLA. Continuing to employ the cognitive/social dichotomy that is so common and widespread in the discussions in the field does not appear to be the best way forward, as it has been acknowledged by various scholars in the field (*e.g.*, Ellis, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2014, 2015; Myles, 2014). Furthermore, it has also been increasingly advocated to seek for a possible synthesis of the two and construct a theory that incorporates both social and cognitive perspectives. For example, Atkinson’s holistic sociocognitive theory (Geeslin & Long, 2014) or Larsen-Freeman’s (2014) chaos/complexity theory could be potential middle-ground positions yielding fruitful in future.

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