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Debates in SLA Studies: Redefining Classroom SLA as an Institutional Phenomenon

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When language is systematically unavailable to some, it is important that we not limit our explanation to the traits of the persons involved; it is equally essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that position the people in the world with a differential access to the common tongue. (McDermott, 1996, p. 283)

■ This passage parsimoniously captures pivotal aspects of a debate currently taking shape in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) between sociocultural and psycholinguistic perspectives on learning and language development. Broadly defined, a sociocultural perspective of development takes as a starting point an understanding that the origin and structure of cognition are rooted to the daily social and cultural practices in which an individual participates. Participation, in this sense, is how an individual carries out activities with others through the use of physical objects, or *artifacts*, and symbolic sign systems, or *psychological tools* (Lantolf, in press; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). By extension, the

study of SLA from a sociocultural perspective is the study of the context in which an L2 user is situated and the ways in which he or she uses physical and symbolic tools in interactions with others (see Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). In contrast, a psycholinguistic perspective on SLA, broadly defined, reverses the primary focus from society to the mind because the mind is assumed to impose structure on language. As such, the goal of SLA research from a psycholinguistic perspective is to posit an internal, mental representation regarding L2 linguistic competence, or *interlanguage* (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972), and to describe how changes in linguistic competence are achieved. Psycholinguistic research acknowledges social context as a potential variable, but only to the extent that factors arising from that context promote or hinder development of the learner's internal representations (see Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997; Long, 1997).

In presenting fundamental features of the debate between sociocultural and psycholinguistic perspectives on SLA, I analyze McDermott's (1996) notion of *traits*, *interactional circumstances*, and *systems* as represented in the passage above and make connections between these concepts and arguments currently being made in the SLA literature. In the final section, I discuss findings from several studies that explore the ways in which the phenomenon of classroom SLA is shaped by the institutional and political contexts in which it is embedded (Gebhard, 1997, 1998; Harklau, 1994). In doing so, in line with a sociocultural position, I argue for a reconceptualization of classroom SLA as an institutional phenomenon shaped by cultures and structures at work in educational systems. Such a reconceptualization is important because studies of classroom SLA, even those grounded in social orientations, have tended to decontextualize classroom discourses as isolated islands of linguistic practice without exploring the ways in which larger institutional practices associated with schooling shape those discourses. Throughout the discussion, I address issues related to the implications of reconceptualizing classroom SLA for the activities of theory building and classroom teaching and learning.

TRAITS

McDermott (1996), an educational anthropologist, problematizes the assumption that learners' characteristics or traits, such as attentiveness, memory, and problem-solving abilities, belong to individuals. Rather, he argues that within formal, institutional contexts, individual traits become static truths that are socially constructed by an educational system designed to discover, describe, and differentially educate children who manifest different rates and ways of learning. As a result, institutional labels such as *learning disabled* or, by extension, *limited English proficient*

(LEP) exist within the culture of schools as categories so powerful that they can “acquire” learners. In describing this phenomenon, McDermott writes that institutional labels “precede any child’s entry into the world and that these labels, well-established resting places in adult conversations, stand poised to take their share from each new generation” (p. 272). Stated another way, McDermott is suggesting that individual traits exist in large part outside as opposed to solely inside the head of the learner. In doing so, he does not claim that this makes the condition of being labeled learning disabled less real to the participants involved. Rather, his point is that a set of discourses associated with the practices of formal education stands ready to assign meaning to different rates and ways of learning that have implications for how children participate in school and in wider social structures.

To provide data, McDermott (1996) shares findings from an 18-month ethnographic study of Adam, an 8-year-old boy who was officially diagnosed as learning disabled (Hood, McDermott, & Cole, 1980). McDermott and his colleagues describe Adam as eager to try in school but as having trouble with isolated cognitive tasks given by the school’s reading specialist or on more contextually sensitive tests given by the research team. In looking for a fuller accounting of the problem, the research team gave up on trying to speculate on the internal workings of Adam’s cognitive functioning. Instead, they turned their attention to analyzing what happened around Adam in daily school practices that seem to “organize” and “display” his moments of being a “learning-disabled” (p. 273) person. In describing this phenomenon, McDermott writes,

On one occasion of his [Adam’s] looking inattentive, for example, it took Adam to look away at just the right time, but it took many others to construct the right time for Adam to look away; it took others to look away from his looking away, and still more to discover his looking away, to make something of it, to diagnose it, to document it, and to remediate it. Whatever was Adam’s problem inside his head, we had forced on us the recognition that Adam had plenty of problems all around him, in every person on the scene, in most every scene called educative. (p. 273)

Applied to a discussion of SLA studies, McDermott’s (1996) shift from a focus on the internal to an examination of the social aspects of learning parallels a paradigm shift in SLA studies from a psycholinguistic to a context-sensitive accounting of the processes involved in language acquisition. Firth and Wagner (1997), in capturing this debate, attack psycholinguistic explanations of language learning as too “individualistic” and “mentalistic” in their accounting of “the interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions” of language learning” (p. 285). In regard to the notion of learners’ traits specifically, Firth and Wagner, as well as others (Kramsch,

1997; Rampton, 1990), object to naturalized terms such as *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker* for several reasons. First, the binary distinction between native speaker and nonnative speaker has led researchers to posit L2 users as objects of study constructed vis-à-vis an imaginary monolingual, homogeneous L2 speech community. In the context of studies of ESL in particular, this imaginary, esteemed community appears to belong to an idealized U.S. or British citizen. Such a community, in fact, does not exist in the politically tidy ways that psycholinguistic studies of SLA suggest. Rather, most users of a language, particularly of world varieties of English, regardless of their proficiency level and regardless of whether they are using their first, second, or third language, are members of multiple, often hybrid discourse communities that construct multiple, hybrid identities that cannot be reduced to a set of predetermined traits (see, e.g., Peirce, 1995; Rampton, 1995; Valdman, 1992).

The response from psycholinguists regarding the concept of multiple identities in an accounting of the processes in SLA has been more or less favorable. Long (1997), for example, responds to Firth and Wagner's (1997) critique by agreeing that the distinction between native speakers and nonnative speakers in his own work and in that of others has ignored or underestimated "other separate or simultaneous speaker identities (father, friend, business partner, etc.) to which both parties may be giving expression when they talk" (p. 320). He adds, however, that the question is a matter about which more empirical evidence is needed, definitions of what counts as evidence aside.¹

Second, Firth and Wagner (1997) argue that the distinction between native speaker and nonnative speaker has antecedents in Chomskian linguistics and notions of linguistic competence. Chomskyan linguistics, by definition, prioritizes the mind over society in constructing an understanding of the origin and structure of linguistic knowledge. As such, Firth and Wagner argue, much of the research in SLA has constructed the nonnative speaker as a *defective communicator* in ways that focus almost exclusively on grammatical competence. As evidence, Firth and Wagner critique studies of input modification and communicative strategies that they assert are built on form-focused, mentalistic constructs such as *interlanguage* (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972) and *fossilization* (Selinker, 1972). Firth and Wagner advise that such studies, by focusing on the presence or the absence of phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic aspects of language, construct meaning as located in the individual's mind and as transferable from brain to brain as opposed to "a social and negotiated product of interaction, transcending

¹ For a debate regarding what counts as research in SLA, see the special issue of *Applied Linguistics* on theory construction (Vol. 14, No. 3, 1993) and Lantolf (1996).

individual intentions and behaviours" (p. 290; see also Lantolf, 1996; van Lier, *in press*).

In response, researchers working within a psycholinguistic paradigm (Kasper, 1997; Long, 1997; Poulisse, 1997) counter that the issues Firth and Wagner (1997) raise, though interesting, say little about how the process of language acquisition takes place, specifically how interaction, as defined by Firth and Wagner, translates into mental functioning. Kasper, in particular, maintains that any reconceptualization of SLA studies, regardless of the theoretical orientation of the researcher, must take into account "what the conditions and mechanisms of learning are" (p. 310). Hall (1997), in her response to Firth and Wagner's argument, explains those conditions and mechanisms, describing competence as arising from "assisted participation" (p. 302) through scaffolding, modeling, and training (see also Lantolf, *in press*).

INTERACTION

McDermott (1996) asserts that, when assessing an individual's ability, it is "essential that we take into account the interactional circumstances that position people in the world" (p. 383). My interpretation of McDermott's notion of "interactional circumstances that position" individuals in the world relates to the above discussion of the ways in which interactions within multiple discourse communities construct the multiple identities of L2 users. In addition, McDermott's notion of interactional circumstances includes a broader understanding of the relationship between interaction and the context in which interaction takes place. Specifically, in his ethnography, McDermott analyzes the contexts in which Adam carries out a range of activities (e.g., remembering his phone number in casual conversation, making a cake in cooking class, taking a test in a formal test-taking situation). The focus of his analysis is the availability of resources in the completion of tasks. These resources take the form of sociolinguistic interactions as well as Adam's use of material objects. The research team found that contexts were not fixed as more or less cognitively demanding but were constructed by the participants in ways that made Adam's disability more or less of a problem and more or less visible to others. In analyzing the team's findings, McDermott writes, "Context is not something into which someone is put, but an order of behaviors of which one is a part" (p. 290). In this sense, he challenges naturalized assumptions regarding the notion of context that suggest that it is an "empty slot . . . the 'con' that contains the 'text,' the bowl that contains the soup" (p. 282). He adds that one of the unfortunate implications of the context-as-container metaphor is that this perspective views context as at the "borders of the

phenomenon under analysis" (p. 282) as opposed to an integral part of learning that shapes and is shaped by texts.

Applied to SLA studies, McDermott's (1996) discussion of the relationship between interaction and context, or text and context, suggests a more encompassing notion of context than is usually assumed in SLA research. Specifically, within SLA studies, the notion of context is often slimly understood as simply the setting where particular discourse patterns, such as the often cited initiation-response-feedback pattern, are assumed to prevail by default of being in a particular location, such as a classroom. Debates surrounding the superiority of natural settings versus classroom settings are an example of the degree to which the notion of context is often undertheorized as a physical location containing texts (for a discussion, see Ellis, 1994, p. 214).

A more theoretically developed understanding of the mediating role context plays in SLA comes from the work of Kramsch (1993). Drawing on Halliday's functional linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1989), Kramsch argues that text and context are two mutually constructing aspects of the same process of meaning construction. In this process, meaning resides not in the formal properties of language but in the interplay between text and the total environment in which it unfolds:

Context is shaped by persons in dialogue with one another, saying things about the world and thus making statements about themselves and their relationship to one another. Through this dialogue, they exchange and negotiate meanings that belong to a community's stock of common knowledge and that draw on a variety of past and present "texts." Context is the matrix created by language as discourse and as a form of social practice. Context should therefore be viewed not as a natural given but as a social construct. (p. 46; see Kramsch & McConnell-Ginet, 1992)

An even more encompassing understanding of the text-context relationship comes from sociological studies of discourse practices. First, using what one might call *microunits* of analysis, researchers (e.g., Goffman, 1963, 1981; see Giddens, 1984, for a review) have paid close attention to the ways in which participants in conversation use linguistic and nonverbal systems of communication, such as gestures and bodily postures, in an orchestrated way to coconstruct meaning. Other discourse analysts (e.g., Goodwin & Goodwin, 1998) have focused on the ways in which physical objects in the environment, such as a hopscotch grid on a school playground, impose structure on conversation and, in effect, act as an invisible but present interlocutor. In contrast, using what one might call *macrounits* of analysis, other social theorists (e.g., Foucault, 1979, in his discussion of panopticism; Giddens, 1984) suggest that the ways in which institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools

physically position people in space, in time, and in relation to one another shape the nature of the discursive practices in which people engage.

In regard to SLA studies, to my knowledge there have been no investigations of the ways in which the relationship between text and context, thus broadly defined, play a role in the processes of SLA. In other words, with the possible exception of studies of computer-assisted communication (e.g., Thorne, 1999a, 1999b), I do not know of any studies that have analyzed the ways in which gestures, physical objects, and the physical positioning of the L2 user in relation to others shape the processes involved in L2 learning. The response from researchers working within a psycholinguistic paradigm (Gass, 1998; Long, 1997), however, suggests that such a broad definition of context is beyond the scope of inquiry in SLA studies proper but is really the study of L2 use. Given the importance of interaction in the process of acquiring an L2, regardless of whether one adopts a psycholinguistic or sociocultural theoretical lens, use and acquisition are two faces of the same process; artificially pulling them apart therefore does not strike me as helpful. How one approaches context in one's research, however, is another question—the answer to which should be based on the questions one is asking and how one's theoretical perspective guides such an investigation. In this sense, I am suggesting not that one paradigm is more valid than another but rather that the value or quality of one's research lies in the degree to which the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the methods have internal logic and integrity.

In regard to researchers interested in questions related to the settings in which SLA takes place, particularly researchers interested in classroom settings, I suggest that a broader conception of the relationship between text and context has something to offer in working toward the condition of internal integrity. Namely, a broader understanding of context is a movement away from what Giddens (1984) calls "methodological individualism" (p. 214)—that is, a movement away from conducting research about social phenomena in which the units of analysis focus on the actions of individuals (such as an analysis of the interactions that take place between an L2 learner and his or her teacher) in the absence of a discussion of social structures that shape these interactions. An alternative to methods that individualize people as objects of study is to design studies with multiple units of analysis in order to create a multifocal approach for seeing mutually constituting dynamics between individual actors and the multiple contexts they inhabit within schools. Methods such as these would provide data for examining the notion that, when L2 learners communicate, at whatever level of effectiveness, it is neither sufficient nor necessary that they share the same grammar. What they must share, in the words of Hanks (1996), is "the ability to orient

themselves verbally, perceptually, and physically to each other and their social worlds" (p. 229; see also Goffman, 1981).

SYSTEMS

When McDermott (1996) refers to language as "systematically unavailable to some" (p. 283), he is referring to the ways in which access to particular discourse practices associated with academic success is not free for the taking. Rather, the character of participant structures in classrooms (see, e.g., Philips, 1972) and organizational structures in schools (see, e.g., Oakes, 1986) give or deny students access to an apprenticeship to the discourses of academic success. Investigations of organizational structures, such as student tracking in U.S. schools, demonstrate that students in college-bound or honors versus general or remedial tracks have differential access to academically sanctioned forms of knowledge and institutional resources in the form of quality curricular materials and skilled teachers (see, e.g., Oakes, 1986, for a discussion of student tracking; see Finley, 1984, for a discussion of teacher tracking).

In regard to classroom studies of SLA, the concept that classroom contexts are embedded within and shaped by a larger school and social context has been relatively unexplored. Given the questions in which psycholinguists are interested, this is not surprising. On the other hand, sociocultural theorists, such as Hall (1997), maintain that a contextual theory of classroom SLA should move in the direction of specifying the conditions under which a language learner's involvement in various "constellations of communicative practices" (p. 304) takes place. An example of such a project is a study conducted by Harklau (1994), who analyzed the ways in which school tracking structures affected the language learning experiences of four ESOL students attending a U.S. high school. She found that so-called low-track classes were, on the whole, poor L2 learning environments. Specifically, low-track students had exposure to truncated, inauthentic reading material, had little practice in composing extend texts beyond the word or sentence level, and had few opportunities to participate orally in peer-directed learning activities. As a result, the texts they produced could be described as ungrammatical, awkward, and deficient. In commenting on these texts and the contexts in which they were produced, Harklau remarks that low-track classes "were distinguished as much by what they did not do as by what they did" (p. 225). Such a state of affairs recalls the work of literacy theorists such as Lankshear and Lawler (1987), who suggest that, just as there are discourse practices at work in schools that socially construct literacy, there are also discourse practices at work in schools that socially construct illiteracy.

In regard to theory building, the findings from Harklau's (1994) study

suggest several important directions for research in classroom SLA. First, given that the language forms used by ESOL students bear echoes of the contexts in which those forms were acquired, constructs in SLA such as fossilization can be reanalyzed as arising not from individual learners' frozen interlanguage but from their relatively frozen social position within schools and society as a whole. In the Vygotskian sense, such a reanalysis suggests that school structures, like all social structures, are mediating tools in the relation between language forms and social meanings. The language forms, in this sense, are the linguistic features of the texts L2 learners produce. The social meanings are the ways in which an evaluation of such texts leads to assumptions about L2 learners' intelligence, their ability to "do school," and their future social status. As such, an analysis of school structures suggests that institutional structures play a role in the distribution of discourses associated with academic success and school failure that parallel the division of social roles and the division of labor found in the sociopolitical context in which schools are embedded. Therefore, schools reflect and enact an understanding of how dominant ideologies define the nature of learning, the nature of language, and the status of L2 users in the society as a whole (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 1989).

One investigation into the above set of assumptions comes from a large-scale, 3-year study of the meaning of school restructuring as experienced by L2 learners in the United States (Gebhard, 1997, 1998; Little & Dorph, 1999).² School restructuring does not have a single definition but involves a broad range of reforms related to student-grouping practices, modifications in curriculum and instruction, changes in approaches to teachers' professional development, improvements in assessment practices, and enhancements in school-community relationships (for a review, see Murphy, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). The qualitative study involved constructing case studies of three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools in California that were awarded sizable restructuring grants from the state as part of a statewide school reform initiative. The case studies were organized around two units of analysis: an analysis of the individual school's restructuring efforts and an analysis of the school experiences of 63 focus students in Grades 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. Of these 63 students, 17 were institutionally designated as LEP based on a home language survey parents completed when they registered their children for school. The data sources used by the research team in constructing the nine case studies included field notes from observations of school life as experienced by the focus students; transcriptions from audiotaped, semi-

² The SB 1274 School Restructuring Study was funded by the Stuart Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation and was conducted under the direction of Judith Warren Little.

structured interviews with students, parents, teachers, teacher's aides, and administrators; and relevant documents (e.g., students' work, students' academic records, curricular materials, and school reports). In addition, at the elementary school level, the database included transcriptions from audio- and videotaped interactions of focal students.

The findings from this study indicate that organizational structures affect the nature of the sociolinguistic interactions available to L2 learners in schools. Specifically, to varying degrees, eight of the nine schools profiled implemented structural changes that did little to address the marginal location and status of L2 learners. Rather, organizational structures tended to ghettoize L2 learners in classrooms where they had limited access to participation in discourse communities supportive of SLA, especially academically sanctioned ways of using texts. Rather, L2 learners were constructed as students with academic limitations in need of remediation as opposed to learners in need of access to linguistic and academic resources. In all but one elementary school, L2 learners confronted a combination of the following conditions:

1. isolating structures: The physical location of ESL and bilingual classrooms on school campuses, institutional structures related to student grouping practices, and participation structures within classrooms collectively isolated L2 learners in ways that limited their access to sociolinguistic resources (e.g., more proficient users of English, academic uses of print).
2. low expectations: L2 users tended to confront low expectations and low supports for the development of appropriate grade-level content knowledge and the acquisition of English in academically sanctioned ways.
3. weak institutional supports: L2 learners tended to confront a lack of collective responsibility for their linguistic and academic growth, weak commitments to the professional development of their teachers, and the absence of basic resources such as textbooks and other curricular materials in their classrooms.
4. construction of a lack of proficiency in English as a learning disability: Organizational discourses and classroom discourses tended to construct ESOL students not as language learners capable of academic achievement but as students with cognitive limitations. This trend was stronger in high schools and weaker but still prevalent in elementary schools.

The counterexample to this trend was evident in the experiences of a Hmong third grader named Pa Hua (a pseudonym), who attended an elementary school that implemented a bold restructuring initiative. This initiative provided L2 learners with access to the same curriculum as

other students in their classes; to support in developing literacy in their L1; to talented, experienced teachers who were familiar with SLA theory and methods; and to English-speaking peers.

CONCLUSION

In the debate in the field of SLA between sociocultural and psycholinguistic perspectives of learning and language development, I align myself with a sociocultural perspective on SLA. However, I advocate a more encompassing, theoretically more developed understanding of the ways in which institutional contexts, teaching contexts, and learning contexts are mutually constituted through discursive practices. Elucidating this point are the findings from two studies (Gebhard, 1997; Harklau, 1994) designed to bridge disciplinary boundaries between applied linguistics and the sociology of schools as structured, cultural spaces. Collectively, a review of the theoretical literature, in conjunction with the findings from these studies, suggests the following points regarding reconceptualizing classroom SLA as an institutional phenomenon:

1. The origin and structure of L2 learners' sociolinguistic knowledge are rooted in the daily social and cultural practices in which they engage.
2. Individual characteristics of learners are not descriptors of their internal mental state in any static or politically neutral way. Rather, descriptors of L2 learners are socially constructed. The nature of this construction is a function of the ways in which discourse practices associated, in part, with formal education assign meaning to the sociolinguistic actions of L2 learners.
3. The context in which L2 learners interact includes the context created by successive turns at talk and uses of texts in classrooms. Context also includes the ways in which L2 users and their interlocutor draw on nonlinguistic semiotic systems related to gestures, bodily postures, and the use of material objects available to them. In addition, an analysis of context encompasses attention to the ways in which L2 users are physically positioned in relation to others in schools.
4. Schools are structured, cultural spaces that play a role in the distribution of discourse practices and the production and reproduction of social orders. Therefore, societal ideologies regarding the nature of learning, the nature of language, and the status of L2 users shape and are shaped by organizational structures that tend to provide students with differential access to participation in academically sanctioned discourse practices in classrooms.

My hope is that such a reconceptualized research agenda will allow researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to simultaneously see inside and outside classrooms in order to gain insights into the supports and constraints L2 students confront in learning an L2—in particular supports and constraints that are not rooted to individual strengths and shortcomings but to factors related to the institutional culture and structure of schools. Such insights have the potential to guide policy makers and practitioners in reforming the educational practices associated with L2 learners.

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Meg Gebhard is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include L2 acquisition in classroom contexts, the professional development of L2 educators, and the implications of school reforms for L2 learners.

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Putting Critical Pedagogy in Its Place: A Personal Account

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■ In this account, I offer a personal reflection on the role critical pedagogy has played in my own professional development. Although this role has been a profound and lasting one, I explain here why I personally have resisted embracing critical pedagogy unreservedly.

Since I first read Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Giroux's (1988) *Teachers as Intellectuals* and subsequently began to explore the literature of critical pedagogy, the ideas and practices this literature offers have had a profound effect on virtually every aspect of my teaching. At one level this influence has been general and has affected my whole approach to the teaching profession. More than anything else, perhaps, critical pedagogy offers a way of combining a trenchant critique of previously unquestioned practices in education with concrete ways of introducing change—that is, with a belief in the transformative power of the individual teacher.

It was critical pedagogy that helped me understand that all teaching methods are ideological in nature (Benesch, 1993; Pennycook, 1989) and that differential power relations and political interests are crucial in understanding the global spread of English teaching (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1995). The exploration of these ideas forms