

SOCIO-CULTURAL STRATEGIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Much has been said and written about the failed policies in the teaching of English as a Second Language in Puerto Rico. The purpose of the following investigation is to contribute a few ideas to the ongoing discussion on the subject.

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In “The Social Construction of Data: Methodological Problems of Investigating Learning in the Zone of Proximal Development,” Peter Smagorinsky (2006) says that “from a semiotic standpoint, the signs that a culture establishes to order its world require tools for creation and interpretation” which provide vertical links among the people of that culture across generations as well as horizontally among contemporaries (2). His statement is based on the ideas of Lev Vygotsky whose theory of child development postulates the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that is, the range of potential each person has for learning. His investigation with children learning language has inspired numerous researchers who have expanded the original theory. For example, Smagorinsky further contends that the learning process is culturally shaped by the social environment in which it takes place. Its conceptualization suggests that the mind doesn’t have a determined capacity for learning: it is

“elastic” and “unbounded” because cognitive growth may take different directions depending on the socio-cultural environment in which it develops. These statements have been confirmed by ongoing studies dealing with the workings of the brain. Pierce J. Howard (2000), for instance, defines learning as “the establishment of new neural networks composed of synaptic connections and their associated *chemotaxic* patterns” (44). In other words, new synapses appear after learning. According to Howard, the density of the brain, measured by the number of synapses, makes the difference in mental capacity. Together, these and other researchers keep enlarging the scope of our understanding as well as our ability to teach a second language.

Because new knowledge is acquired within a specific culture, most assessment vehicles are culturally charged and, therefore, cannot be universally applied. Research based on data obtained through the use of these universally applied quantitative methods

is suspect of affirming social constructs which are not neutral but charged with the biases of those who created the instruments of measurement. The same happens with teaching methodologies which may not apply to our specific situation with Puerto Rican students. Research based on Vygotsky's conceptualization of the zone of proximal development should take into account precisely those cultural particularities that make our students a specific case.

The Zone of Proximal Development

The "zone" is conceived as a range of potential that all students possess for learning. As Clifford Morris (2006) points out, Vygotsky parted from the Marxist-Leninist thesis which claims that all fundamental human cognitive activities take shape "in a matrix of social history and from the products of socio-historical development" (1). He believed that the intellectual ways of knowing the world that a student displays are not primarily determined by "innate factors" such as inherited intelligence, but as "products of the activities practiced in the social institutions of the culture in which the individual is immersed" (Morris, 1).

The general theory of cognitive development was developed in a context of language learning in children (Vygotsky 1962), and therefore it has become very attractive for ESL teachers. His major theoretical tenet is that social interaction plays a fundamental role to the individual's learning experience. He states that every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first interpsychologically or between individuals, and then intrapsychologically, or inside the same person's consciousness. It applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. Moreover, all the higher functions which an individual perform, have their origin in a social interaction between individuals. Full development of the ZPD depends on full social interaction: the skills that can be developed with teachers' guidance and collaborative learning in the classroom exceed what an individual can attain by him/herself.

Vygotsky's theory attempted to explain how we

first learn our native language in response to a need for communication: we imitate and repeat sounds we hear socially, until it becomes an automatic, internalized process to produce the language. At any given age, however, cognitive development is limited to a certain range. The ZPD is that gap between a student's level of knowledge (determined by independent problem solving skills), and the potential which that student has to learn new skills. Several other researchers have done similar investigation and have elaborated similar theories. For instance, Jim Cummins' idea of "Information plus One" (i+1) explains how learners cannot build new knowledge without a foundation established prior to it. The contention is that for the most part, learners are unable to bridge a large gap without first developing a frame that supports and connects the new information. These theories have been confirmed in recent studies in the growing field of neuroscience. They have demonstrated that the brain is more changeable than anyone had realized previously.

In his article "Ultimate Self-Improvement," Gary Styx (2003) affirms that even in older people "some areas of the brain can renew themselves" (45). Fred H. Gage (2003) furthers this assertion in his article "Brain, Repair Yourself." One of the most amazing aspects of neurogenesis (the neural stem divides and the offspring becomes integrated into the functional circuits of the brain), is that "experience can regulate the rate of cell division, the survival of new-born neurons and their ability to integrate into the existing neural circuitry" (52). If this happens in maturity, how much more can we expect from young minds as those of our students?

In "The Mutable Brain," Marguerite Holloway (2003) explains how experience "pushes" the brain to change. The quality of "plasticity" is evident in the synapses "where neurons communicate with one another by way of chemical signals (80-81). In the learning process, the connection between neurons is strengthened, more connections are created, and their ability to communicate chemically is enhanced. Studies with mice have demonstrated that providing stimulation by enriching the environment and presenting them with challenging tasks, the brain

increases its activity and the synapses multiply faster. Positive rewards maintain the learning process active.

Whole Language Approach:

The “whole language approach” used in many schools and universities (including the UPR at Utuado) draws to some extent on the ZPD concept. Goodman and Goodman (1990) expound on the subject affirming that language literacy depends on the social exchange. Students who use their first language as exclusive means of communication, don't feel the pressing need to make the effort to bridge the gap to master a new form of communication. The activities included in the application of ZPD, as Newman, Griffin, & Cole (1989) have stated, should reflect the cultural background of the learners. For instance, local newspapers in the second language may be more interesting reading material for our students than a textbook prepared for American schools or universities.

In Peter Smagorinsky's (2006) interpretation “the social nature of learning and development implies that data are social constructs developed through the relationship of researcher, research participants, and the means of data collection” (2). It is probable then that any difference in the variables would cause a difference in the results of each experiment. Therefore, the need to replicate investigations and to apply new strategies leading to improve teaching methods, should be open-ended.

Social Constructivism:

Another approach to ZPD is the addition of social constructivism theories of pedagogy. There are several authors who have been named as the originators of constructivism, among them Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, and Vico. But there are many more who have developed this concept. In their article “Situating the Zone of Proximal Development,” March and Ketterer (2006) explain the strong claims for “deep and active learning” made by social constructivist theories. Students acquire knowledge by participating in tasks

which take place in an environment that is permeated with what they call “distributed knowledge.” That is, learning happens when students participate in action-based contexts (Gibson 1979; Lave & Wenger 1991). Similarly, March and Ketterer explain that mental construction is the result of authentic tasks, social interaction, and collaboration in context.

Jenna-B (2006) combines the ZPD approach with the constructivist approach. The following guidelines are a summary of the main points this researcher makes:

1. The teacher should provide the framework for each task giving the minimum support necessary for the student to succeed, that is, without denying the student's need to build his/her own foundation. The teacher must find a balance between supporting on the one hand, and stimulating the student to act independently beyond his/her current ability level.
2. The teacher has to be aware that if the instruction falls outside of the zone—above or below their ZPD—there will be no real learning.
3. The skill taught should be practiced until all of the students master it through teacher modeling / student imitation, or peer reciprocal teaching.
4. The classroom should be set up to foster group work and student collaboration.

The contemporary growth of constructivism has been attributed mainly to Jerome Bruner's (1966) classroom investigation. He contends that students would learn easier and retain better those concepts they discover on their own, instead of the traditional method of passive learning by rote or by teacher's lectures. He coined the concept of “scaffolding” to specify the types of assistance that make possible for learners to function at the highest levels of their ZPD, going from assisted to independent performance with the help from adults and/or peers (5).

In “Scaffolding: Emergent Writing in the Zone of Proximal Development,” Bodrova and Leong (1998) affirm that “at any given moment, there are tasks that lie outside of the child's ZPD, such that no amount of assistance will facilitate learning” (3). Piaget (1969) also insists that external stimuli may be significant only to the degree that a student can

assimilate them by means of his existing knowledge (5). In consonance with these notions, Morris asserts, “the most effective teaching is somewhat, but not too much, in advance of [student’s] development” (2). Even mentally and physically handicapped children, as well as those in a disadvantaged situation are able to follow the same laws as “normal” children and eventually develop the needed skills.

For a great number of our Puerto Rican students, the production of our second language with any degree of proficiency falls outside of their ZPD, and the problem is compounded as they advance from one school grade to another without acquiring the minimum language skills essential to move on. By the time they get to college, the expectations are that, after twelve years of schooling, they will be able to produce the language and we, as teachers, will help to polish their conversational, written, and interpretive skills. However, for a great majority, the reality falls far from the expected proficiency. Ironically, our problem is worsened by the fact that some of our students have lived in the United States and are fully bilingual. It doesn’t seem like a problem since those are the students who could be potentially the most likely to do peer-teaching. However, they don’t have the teaching skills (or in some cases, the desire) which would enable them to help others. Consequently, our most advanced students stay below their ZPD where no new knowledge is acquired, while for the most disadvantaged, the opposite is true. Teachers find themselves targeting the middle-ground students where the majority may be situated. Frequently, we have to move on and take away the “scaffolding” when those disadvantaged students haven’t yet mastered the skill, letting them sink or swim on their own.

For scaffolding to work properly, the instruction must be given not to solve a specific problem and be done, but to solve that problem as an instance of other similar problems in which the student is able to apply independently the new knowledge. In the production of a second language, however, many of our students frequently fail to apply the learned structures, and under the pressure of performance revert to literal translation when composing. They copy structures and modes directly from the first language. Different

from other disciplines in which learning one formula allows students to apply the steps in solving a similar problem, language is fluid. There is not one specific way of expressing one’s thoughts without variations, and that creates a degree of confusion that seems insurmountable to those students whose previous experiences with language have been deficient.

In the worst cases, similar to Bodrova and Leong’s study with preschoolers, our students invent spelling guiding themselves by sounds similar to Spanish, or writing words in Spanish with an English ending. The habit of looking up words in the dictionary has not been developed or emphasized, and even when it has, the most disadvantaged students complain that it takes too long to look up all the words that are unfamiliar to them. If the task seems impossible to accomplish, some won’t even try. As long as the punishment is a paper full of red marks for spelling and other mistakes, they will continue guessing their way through their compositions. Incomplete syntax, improper word order, omission of function words such as articles and prepositions where needed, or use of the wrong pronoun are common errors that have an impact on the perceived competence and effectiveness of a communicator. All of these are constant mistakes in the compositions of many of our Puerto Rican students.

The laws created to protect individuals with learning disabilities and other challenged students have brought unforeseeable pressures for teachers in their classrooms. The accommodation of these students among the rest of the student population is a subject over which most of us have to tread softly to ruffle no feathers. We cannot ask how are we going to find the time, the means, and the training to help these students. A study conducted by the **Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research** (2006) with two adults with cerebral palsy reveals some strategies which could be used to teach grammar when dealing with extremely disadvantaged students protected by the laws. In order to correct errors which have persisted for a long time, individuals must become aware of the incorrect usage, and must be given the opportunity to practice many times before the error disappears from the composed sentences.

The target lessons in the study were “word order in adjective phrases” and “inversion of the auxiliary Do in Wh-questions.” The experiment had three phases: baseline, instruction, and maintenance. The teaching was designed in multiple probes of a single item across behaviors. “Probes were used to elicit production of the targeted structures to establish baseline performance rates, measure progress during instruction, and measure maintenance of skills” (46: 2). The probes contained incomplete sentences which the participants were required to combine into one complete sentence. All baseline, instruction, and maintenance sessions were conducted in a one to one basis.

With disadvantaged students, the maintenance sessions are extremely important because a mistake which has persisted for most of a person’s life is not easily removed. The problem of using this method in our schools and universities is obvious: How can teachers dedicate individual attention in a one to one basis, and enough practice time until each one of these lessons is learned? Even more, how do we motivate students who have failed to learn this lessons many times before, and have a bad disposition towards this material? Politicians and administrators think the problem is solved after writing and approving these laws, but it is the teachers who have to deal with overcrowded classrooms and a large mixture of ZPD levels.

From Theory to Practice:

In the article “Bridging Theory and Practice,” Lisa D. Young (2003) proposes a new instructional design approach presenting guidelines which allow students to construct knowledge and allow room for their creativity. First, she posits the creation of “environments that include social negotiation and cognitive responsibility” (4). Young’s emphasis is on the use of computers. Virtual learning has allowed the disappearance of the physical restraints of the classroom, and has enabled “a higher level of teamwork where learning is a continuous multi-level process” (4). The second tenet is to “provide authentic experiences and contexts” since constructivist theory

seeks knowledge based on experience. In the third place, Young posits the development of pervasive knowledge: prior experiences should be connected to new knowledge “allowing for relevant facts, information and skills to be brought to the forefront of learning” in order to “engage in reflective thinking and metacognition” (5). Needless to say, the multiple possibilities in the application of computers in language learning are extremely promising, and will probably become the *sine qua non* in language instruction in the future. At the moment, however, most schools and many universities have limited resources in technology, and the development of this type of programs depends on the use of a computer for every student in the classroom. Moreover, this is predicated on the assumption that teachers will receive adequate training as “coaches,” and abandon their previous methodology as lecturers. This last feature will diminish their traditional rhetorical role which, for many professors, will signify a spiritual demotion.

In the mean time, research in cooperative learning, with or without computers, seems to be one of the best alternatives in the acquisition of a second or foreign language. David and Roger Johnson (2006) define cooperative learning as “working together to accomplish a shared goal” (1). Working in small groups, students maximize their own and each other’s learning. In comparison with a more traditional method of competition in which students focus on self-interest and personal success ignoring others, cooperative learning offers more effective outcomes: greater achievements and productivity, positive relationships with other students, and psychological health (2). Group work contributes to the enrichment of the learning environment, and the tasks performed in the classroom are not only rewarded with higher grades—according to the amount of work they put into it—but also with the satisfaction of performing socially.

Johnson & Johnson warn us, however, about fooling ourselves into believing that “well-meaning directives to ‘work together,’ ‘cooperate,’ and ‘be a team,’ will be enough to create cooperative efforts among group members” (2). An understanding of the

components that make cooperative work effective is necessary. The following elements are put forward as essential:

1. **Positive Interdependence:** This is achieved when group members perceive that they are linked with each other in a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds. Each group member has to be seen as having the responsibility of making an essential contribution.

2. **Promotive Interaction (Preferably face-to-face):** The members of the group need to “promote each other’s success by sharing resources and helping, supporting, encouraging and applauding each other’s efforts to achieve” (3).

3. **Individual and Group Accountability:** The group must be accountable for achieving its goals, and each member for contributing a share of the work.

4. **Interpersonal and Small Group Skills:** Leadership, decision making, trust building, communication, and conflict-management skills empower students to successfully handle teamwork as well as task work.

5. **Group Processing:** When group members discuss how well they achieved their goals they can maintain more effective working relationships. They need to be honest about what helped and what deterred the task at hand and the learning experience in general (4).

What Works in Other Countries:

Lastly, I want to mention an important research conducted by Ingrid Pufahl, Nancy Rhodes, and Donna Christian (2001), entitled “What We Can Learn From Foreign Language Teaching In Other Countries.” This study collected information from 22 educators of elementary and secondary schools in 19 different countries: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Perú, Spain, and Thailand. They also gathered information about language learning from comparative education reports in China, England, and Hong Kong. The participants responded to questions about teaching methodologies,

strategies, and policies which have proved to be successful in their countries. After examining the data, there were eight salient characteristics present in every exemplary method:

1. **An Early Start:** Most respondents pointed at an early start (age eight or earlier) to begin the achievement of language proficiency. Many of the countries had compulsory education programs in foreign languages.

2. **A Well-Articulated Framework:** Languages are learned in proportion to the importance they are given within a curriculum. According to Pufahl *et al.*, the framework has to be a well planned instrument “that provides a common basis and terminology for describing objectives, methods and approaches, skills, practices and assessments” (2), all of which inform language teaching and reinforce the importance and advantages of learning another language.

3. **Rigorous Teacher Education:** A well-trained faculty is often cited as one of the basic and most important factors in any successful program. In Morocco, for instance, English teachers are among the best trained in the country. After a four year degree, which includes one year specializing in either literature or linguistics, they must spend a year studying methodology and practical training in language teaching. These researchers underscore that “a crucial factor in teacher quality is the status of the teaching profession, because it directly impacts the quality of candidates who go into teaching” (2). When admission into this career is competitive, it “creates a high degree of selectivity and increases the prestige of a teaching degree” (2). In some countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, study and work abroad programs contribute to the high level of language proficiency among foreign language teachers and their job-placement opportunities.

4. **Comprehensive Use of Technology:** Innovative technologies and media are becoming one of the most accepted ways to teach and “entertain” the increasingly attention-challenged population. This includes access to information through Internet which would be out of reach for the students otherwise, and

the interaction and collaboration with pen pals from other countries.

5. Integration of Language and Content Learning: The use of a foreign language to teach content subjects such as science, history and others, have become quite popular in many countries. In some private schools, all of the subjects are taught in the second or foreign language. Our attempt to something similar in Puerto Rico—the Bilingual Citizen Project—was unfortunately unsuccessful due to lack of enthusiasm and training.

6. Focus on Language Learning Strategies: Specific strategies including how to bridge vocabulary gaps and effective reading and listening, have proved to be advantageous to learners of different languages. One example mentioned by the researchers which has worked for us in Puerto Rican settings is to build on the first language knowledge. The better students know their first language, the easier it would be for them to compare and contrast vocabulary (use of cognates), structure, verbal expressions, etc.

7. Grouping Students According to Proficiency Levels: The sole use of the foreign language may be applied in smaller groups with a comparative level of knowledge in the foreign language. (In Puerto Rican classrooms, however, this is very difficult to enforce since the dominant language pulls everyone—even the few bilinguals—into the more comfortable and familiar way of communication via Spanish.)

8. Assessment: This is one of the most highlighted practices in foreign language education. Most of the participants surveyed said to have school-leaving examinations as part of the motivation for students to apply themselves seriously to learn in order to pass this test. In the Netherlands, where three languages are obligatory (English, French and German), the results of the achievement tests count for half of the final grade in the subject. In our university, assessment focuses on the requirements of the Planning Office, guided by a “show of results” we have to present during the visit of the Middle States accreditation representatives. The students are barely affected

by these assessment results.

To some extent, we have already adopted some of these strategies in our curriculum in Puerto Rico. But more and more language teachers feel their prestige dwindling under political and economical pressures. It would be of great help if we could reinforce at least the first three steps in the list above. A more solid early start in elementary schools would ensure some degree of proficiency by the time students get to the university. We shouldn't ask for any less after twelve years of English instruction. For that, however, the policy of the Department of Education in terms of language teaching curriculum and recruitment has to be held to higher standards of accountability. A well articulated framework as well as rigorous teacher's training should be required before a position as a teacher in ESL is granted. Above all, the status of the teaching profession in general, as well as the teaching and learning of a second language, has to be seen as a prestigious endeavor (paired with income) if things are to get better. As long as our political views cloud and relegate the learning of English, all the teaching strategies will render a slow progress in our “official” second language.

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