Communicative Discourse in Second Language Classrooms: From Building Skills to Becoming Skillful

Mahmoud Suleiman

California State University, Bakersfield

ABSTRACT

The dynamics of the communicative discourse is a natural process that requires an application of a wide range of skills and strategies. In particular, linguistic discourse and the interaction process have a huge impact on promoting literacy and academic skills in all students especially English language learners (ELLs). Using interactive approaches in second language classrooms is very critical in helping ELLs in not only in building necessary skills, but more importantly becoming skillful in undertaking academic and literacy tasks. In addition, key contextual demands and conditions for effective discourse in the classroom should be created. This paper examines the anatomy of the speech event and draws pedagogical implications that will assist teachers in making necessary adaptations for ELLs.

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Introduction

The anatomy of language development can help in understanding how linguistic behavior is developed and shaped later on in children's lives. At the same time, it can be an indicator of how language and literacy develop at different stages. This awareness about the process of language development can eventually help educators in providing necessary ingredients and creating conducive conditions for nurturing students' linguistic and academic skills in schools and beyond.

Understanding first language acquisition has been associated with interpreting how children's cognitive abilities develop. For many years, studying how humans acquire their first language has been the focus of study by psychologists and linguists alike. Although views vary on how children acquire their first language, there is a general agreement among researchers that acquiring a language is a complex mental, psychological and social activity.

Research on how a child acquires a first language has become the basis for understanding how second and foreign language learning occurs. Many correlations have been made in an attempt to account for the process in second and foreign language classrooms. In addition,

bilingualism (which is the focus of another chapter) has drawn much of its models and approaches from the existing research and empirical data of second language acquisition studies which have attempted to account for the bilingual development in learners acquiring two or more languages during their early and advanced stages of life.

Additionally the process of second and foreign language development is better understood through the distinction between the two languages at hand: the first language of the learner (L1) and the second and/or foreign language (L2). The second and/or foreign language is also referred to as the target language (TL). The L1 and L2 (TL) of the learner interact in many interesting ways. This interaction has been a focus of study by linguists, psychologists, and language educators for a long time. While views vary on their theoretical foundations, they serve as a helpful frame of reference upon which language teachers can base their instructional choices in the classroom.

Views on first language acquisition and second/foreign language learning have deep roots in such fields as such as psychology, linguistics and many feeder sub-fields in education (such as sociology, anthropology, ethnography and the like). In fact, many of these fields (namely sociology, anthropology, ethnography and the like) have contributed largely to the landmark and current linguistic models and theories of first, second, and foreign language acquisition. Thus, multiple perspectives abound about language acquisition from the lenses through which one examines related phenomena. These perspectives are equally significant for language teachers and educators.

It is important that keep in mind that language acquisition is viewed within the context of language's natural ecological place of human interaction. Therefore, the ecology of language acquisition will be illustrated by casting light on key ingredients that conceptualize various

complex phenomena related to language development. A conceptual framework is presented based on the landmark and current theories that characterize the process and product of language acquisition. The implications of various approaches to language acquisition are enormous, so drawing upon views and models can help in bridging the theoretical gaps and assist teachers in formulating a sound rationale that justifies their practices in learning/teaching situations. Similarly, diversity of opinions are expected given the nature of issues studied thus leaving a wide range of options for teachers to consider in their efforts to integrate a viable eclectic approach that can inform their instruction.

Accordingly, this paper provides an overview of basic approaches and perspectives on language acquisition as a frame of reference to account for how the process and product of language development are achieved. Although there is no consensus among these theories and approaches, examining the basic tenets of each will help in providing language teachers and educators of the knowledge base needed to effectively work with students in second/foreign language classrooms. While substantiating some foundational principles from various theories/approaches that characterize the process of language development, the paper draws pedagogical implications from the existing models and approaches that can enhance the learning and teaching outcomes in linguistically diverse settings.

Divergent Views on Language Acquisition

It is worthwhile to examine some of the current and widely adopted perspectives and views on language acquisition. Given the voluminous literature and research in the field, few will be highlighted that have come to shape the pedagogical practices especially in language instruction (including second and foreign languages) in schools today.

As pointed out earlier, studying how language is acquired has been a focal point of interest in various fields such psychology, linguistics and education in general. Much of the insight gained about how language is acquired has been contributed through observing and analyzing the linguistic behaviors of infants and young children. Observing children and what they do with language has cast some light on universal patterns that describe how all children regardless of their environment, their first language, their surroundings, acquire one or more languages. This can be an eye-opening experience in regard language acquisition and development.

The focus of studies on first language acquisition over the past few decades revolves around competing schools of thought. One school of thought attributes acquiring language to the role of the environment and the influence of adults on children's linguistic development. The primary contributor to this view is B. F. Skinner who promoted the seemingly passive process of language learning. He contends that the child's brain is a "tabula rasa" or blank slate upon which experience is engraved by conditioning and other environmental factors. The Skinnerian perspective has had a large impact on curricular and instructional activities in schools, including language learning and teaching that can still be traced to the ***behaviorist*** constructs and postulations.

Nonetheless the impact of behaviorism has largely been waning given the rise of ***cognitivist*** and ***innatist*** views on learning. In fact, these perspectives have risen as a reaction to the behaviorist models and principles. In particular, the Chomkyian construct emphasizes the contrasting view that humans are innately endowed and pre-equipped with creative and intelligent linguistic abilities. For instance, the notion that humans are biologically pre-wired

with such devices as Language Acquisition Device (LAD) has resulted in a dramatic paradigm shift in the way language acquisition, learning, and ultimately language teaching, are viewed.

Another perspective asserts that a child's linguistic ability is a result of an inborn faculty and a biological endowment. Proponents of this view echo the developments in cognitive psychology and its pioneers. Jean Piaget's contributions have provided a framework for linguists and educators to describe language development early on within the context of infants' intellectual growth. Accordingly, language emergence is a reflection of the child's ability to perform certain cognitive tasks at certain stages. In other words, infants and young children go through several developmental stages during which expressions and language use by children at each stage are seen as a reflection of the child's cognitive ability at that stage. As the child develops cognitive abilities in stages, s/he uses language based on their cognitive abilities, personal and psychological wants and needs.

Again this perspective has largely influenced the school curriculum and instruction. Many practices can be traced to the cognitivist views which are more visible in the way the scope and sequence of the curriculum is designed. Yet, another school of thought examines the role of the social environment in the process of constructing meaning using linguistic abilities and other faculties' children have. Lev Vygotsky is credited for this unique perspective in which learning and teaching are social events.

These schools of thought have largely been at odds for a long time at best. They often raise many questions that provide answers. So, how is language acquired? What is the role of the environment in language learning? What role do adults play in children's language development? What is the best way to learn language? What is the best way to teach language? How all these issues are approached in examining second language learning and teaching?

These questions and others have been largely accounted for by many schools of thought, literacy models, linguistic theories, as well as psycho-sociocultural paradigms. Although there is no consensus among those theories and approaches, each shed an important light on what really happens when learners engage in literacy development and linguistic discourse of any kind. Following is a brief summary of these accounts describing their salient features.

Behaviorism

One of the widely held beliefs during the fifties and sixties was the contributions of B. F. Skinner and his colleagues that learning takes place through conditioning and stimulus response triggered by environmental factors and rewards. As such, language learning takes place through modeling from adults, thus pattern practice and rote memorization and mimicry are dominant learning strategies. According to behaviorists, the human brain is a blank slate *(tabula rasa)* upon which experience is engraved (Skinner, 1957, Baum, 2005). Following are some of the basic tenets of the behaviorist school of thought: *(1) Language learning takes place passively based on the tabula rasa notion; (2) Language learning takes place through stimulus-response and conditioning; (3) Language learning strategies involve mimicry, memorization, and drilling*; and *(4) Language learning is enforced through rewards and repetition.*

This perspective on how learning and language develop is significant, albeit its many limitations. There are some implications that can be gleaned form this perspective, but certainly not sufficient enough to the extent to which language complexity dictates. More importantly the complex cognitive processing and the unique role of the brain in the process are undermined by this limited view.

Cognitivism

Many perspectives fall within this paradigm (see for example Piaget, 1967, 1976; Fischer, 1980, Cole et al, 2005). One of the main strands of cognitive stance is the focus on the multi-stage process of cognitive development. J. Piaget's postulation that learning takes place through a hierarchy of cognitive stages has paved the way for new paradigm shifts regarding how literacy learning develops. Accordingly, language learning is cognitively based and proceeds through a given natural scope and sequence. The basic principles of this school of thought regarding language and literacy development include:

(*1) Language development is cognitively based;*

(2) Stages of language learning are universal, not culturally bound;

(3) Language learning is a hierarchical process; and

(4) Language learning involves various modes of thought processes.

While both behaviorist and cognitive psychologists have a common goal of attempting to understand linguistic behavior in relation to the brain function, they disagree about how language is learned/taught.

As the debate continued, the vast differences in opinions have promoted further studies and investigations. Researchers have relied not only on language production as a source of data to describe these complex processes, but also the physiological and biological aspects that come into play and how language relates to cognitive and other abilities.

Innatism

Often referred to as the nativistic approach, this theory was postulated by Noam Chomsky, the father of modern linguistics, whose ideas of linguistic theory rest on the premise of biological endowment and the creative aspect of language use (Chomsky, 1957; Chomsky, 1986). The notion that humans are pre-equipped with language faculties, referred to by

Chomsky, as Language Acquisition Device (LAD)--a device that never shuts off and constantly functions in language production and use.

Despite the theoretical appeal and evidence regarding this characterization of language acquisition, very few, if any, researchers have ventured to adopt this model as a pedagogical framework for language teaching. Nonetheless, much of pedagogical practices and literacy approaches can be linked to the nativistic ideas and foundations. For example, theories of comprehension have build on this unique view of language processing.

In any event, there are several tenets that describe this theoretical model. These can contribute to our understanding of language and literacy development and might have implications for literacy programs everywhere. Some of the basic innatist principles include:

(1) *Humans are biologically endowed and pre-equipped to use language;*

(2) Humans learn how to "talk" the way they learn how to "walk";

(3) *Emphasis is on the creative and generative aspects of language use; and*

(4) *Linguistic intelligence and language are universal human phenomena.*

The innatist view has been shaping the study of language learning and teaching for some time. Despite the focus on developing a theory rather than pedagogy, this view has become widely circulated in the academic discourse among researchers and educators alike. While the primary focus is on cognition within this paradigm, the context of language development cannot be fully accounted for without any consideration of how language is used among participants within the social circles that share that language. This has provided an impetus for another dimensions of language study that focuses on how it is used in a social setting.

__Constructivism__

Constructivism builds on the premise that meanings are created and constructed in a social setting. As such, learners are active participants in the making and re-making of meanings upon which understanding is based. In educational settings, this active and constructive process (Dewey, 1916, 1933), primarily rests upon the learner's "previous experience, familiarity with concepts, and a general understanding of language" (Morrow, 1993, p. 66). Accordingly, learners engage in both social and mental functions as they proximally develop on a given continuum. This process has been characterized by Vygotsky (1978) as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), through which language develops based on teacher scaffolding and encouragement. Given the different dimensions of the constructivist approach, several principles underlie the constructivist theory. While these might seem at odds with the behaviorist construct, they could serve as a blueprint to better understand how literacy could develop in social settings. Some of these principles include:

(1) *Literacy development evolves though rich social interactions;*

(2) Literacy develops through scaffolding, support and encouragement;

(3) Literacy relates to both social and cognitive development;

(4) Literacy develops in a larger context that includes culture.

These paradigms have largely influenced literacy research and shaped the knowledge and skills that drive language arts standards and program guidelines (Gunning, 2010; Cooter & Reutzel, 2012). They also have shaped the way researchers in the field look at language and literacy development taking into account the complexity and multidimensionality of the process. For example, Halliday (1989) identified several language functions that are based on children's cognitive and social exchange when they engage in a given speech event and linguistic

discourse. He identified the following language functions that have direct implications of planning literacy activities. These language functions include:

Instrumental: is based on the need to get something;

Regulatory: is based on control of the present situation;

Interactional: based on the social exchange among language users;

Personal: is based on the self-disclosure using language as a tool;

Heuristic: is based on inquiry and need to obtain information;

Imaginative: is based on the creative aspect of language use; and

Informative: is based on the shared knowledge via language.

According to Halliday (2004), meaning-making is a social phenomenon is which children construct meanings through linguistic discourse and utilization of various language functions. More importantly, meanings develop in social semantic stages when children engage in any linguistic behavior.

Multiple Intelligences View

Another impact of these theoretical constructs that have attempted to conceptualize the learning process is the evolution of the theories on intelligence. The most prominent model has been suggested by Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, which explores the frames of the human mind along with the cognitive processes involved when children interact and make sense of the world around them. According to his recent account of the multiple intelligences, Gardner (2006) identifies the following unique intrinsic abilities that characterize children's intelligent interactions:

Linguistic Intelligence – the innate ability to use language and translate that skill into effective language performance based on language traits and aspects;

Musical Intelligence – as a language in itself, musical ability involves learning through musical nodes and rhythms;

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence – the ability to process deductively the abstractions of math and logical reasoning using numbers and symbols;

Spatial intelligence – the ability to visualize and perceive in a given physical space with graphic representations of concepts and stimuli around us;

Body and Kinesthetic Intelligence – the ability to use non-verbal behavior and psychomotor skills to express, construct, and interpret meanings;

Intrapersonal Intelligence – the ability to understand emotions and behaviors and act upon them in a given social and linguistic discourse;

Interpersonal Intelligence – the ability to use various linguistic and heuristic functions in a given socio-linguistic discourse;

Naturalistic Intelligence – the ability to process knowledge and appreciate things around us in as reflected in the natural world; and

Spiritualistic Intelligence – the ability engage in moral and ethical behavior based on intrinsic beliefs and creeds.

Undoubtedly, there are other avenues that transcend these identifiable forms of intelligence. This is true especially when we examine elements of diversity as they pertain to cultural, ethical, moral, linguistic, social, socio-economic, ethnic, and other variables. In other words, there are unique cultural and linguistic patterns that can be identifies based on the intelligent ways members of a given group or culture interact with the world around them.

According to Bennett (2006), knowledge of how children learn and learning styles has become as one of the most promising avenues to improve education, especially in diverse

settings. Needless to say, the knowledge about language, intelligence, and literacy will augment our understanding of the learner's relevant cultural experiences as they relate to learning and teaching.

Of course, culture - whether at the home, school, or environment - is the general framework within which children develop literacy, use language, socialize and interact based on their unique intelligences. Thus, the development of children's preferred ways of learning is intricately related to their cultural and social expectations. This underscores the need for a more comprehensive integration in literacy programs.

It should be pointed out that within the multiple intelligence perspectives about how our brains function, language seems to take a central role in orchestrating human interaction with the world around us. Thus one can hardly imagine the absence of language in engaging in any form of these intelligences outlined above. Consider the following questions:

- *Can one be spiritually intelligent without the function of linguistic intelligence?*

- *Are linguistic and musical intelligences remotely different or can they enhance one another?*

- *Is there a relationship between the two and others?*

- *How any of the intelligences relate to language and vice versa (how language relates to other avenues of intelligence)?*

- *What traits and aspects of language can be described based on other related forms of intelligence such as artistic, bodily kinesthetic, logical…etc.?*

These questions and others can form the basis for underscoring the power language exerts in our life. In fact, doing language is equally vital to doing anything else to survive and thrive

so long human complex needs are driven by cognitive, physical, social, cultural, spiritual ... or other needs and wants.

Ecologist View

Since language development is a very complex process and involves many intervening factors, it important to underscore the ecological cycle of language development from its roots to the fruits. This epistemology, which I refer to as an ecologist view, requires considering input and output factors, process and product conditions, and most importantly the natural course language acquisition takes over time. Having this in mind, Brown (1991) provided a graphic scheme which reflects a profound ecological cycle that can promote a depthful anatomy of how language evolves in a natural setting. Depicting the intricately related factors, the Figure 1 illustrates (see Figure 1) the ecologist view of language development.
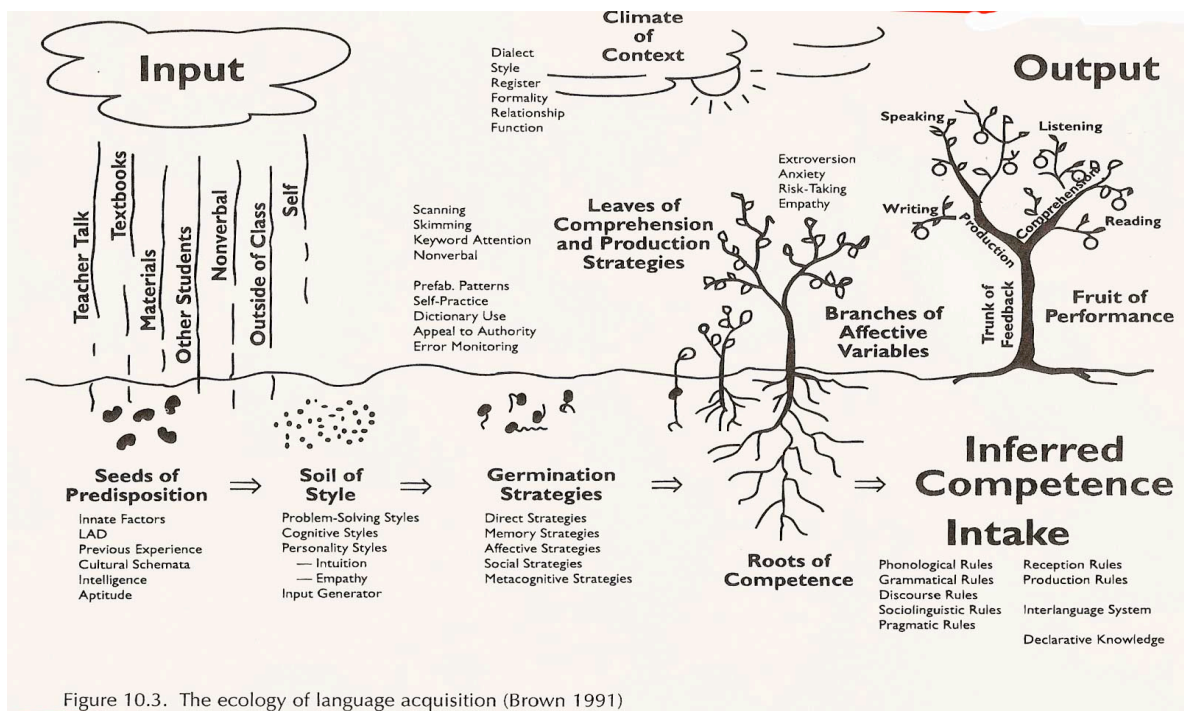

Figure 10.3. The ecology of language acquisition (Brown 1991)

Figure 1: Adapted from Brown (1994, p. 296)

Upon a close examination of the ecologist view as depicted from the figure above, one can glean a number of propositions that reflect the ecologist's approach to language acquisition. Some of these include:

(1) Language development is an on-going, continual process;

(2) Language development largely depends on input and output conditions;

(3) The evolution from the roots to fruits of language takes time and effort which can be conscious and/or subconscious;

(4) Language output can be a reflection of the input and other factors;

(5) The evolution of language is a dynamic and rich natural universal process;

(6) Language development takes its natural course in sequence and scope; and

(7) Underlying deeply hidden aspects are equally important to tangible (e.g. visible and audible) in any linguistic interactional event or task

Brown (1994, 2007) extensively discusses the principles of language learning based on this ecological perspective. In examining Brown's model, it is evident that none of the theories should claim that it has the absolute ultimate account without acknowledging the validity of counter opinions. In other words, while these theories vary in their characterization of the process, they should be equally important in helping us understand the various nuances on language development. While unfortunately these theories over-engage with the pitfalls of others at the expense of their own, they rarely acknowledge the complementary nature of divergent accounts that holistically broaden our understanding of the unique universal phenomena associated with language learning, teaching, and development. Consequently, the discourse among scholars in these fields have enriched the study of language learning and

teaching by reflecting a profound synthesis of various schools of thought in advancing linguistic theories and the field of linguistics.

Linguistic View

While the field of linguistics has been largely influenced by various theories of learning, it has taken these constructs to a different level in an attempt to account for the process and product of language acquisition. Thus various sub-fields of linguistic study have emerged, each with a unique perspective about linguistic behaviors and the development of language. These sub-fields include neurolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and other areas of language study that focus on specific aspects of language (e.g. phonetics, morphology, semantics, syntax, etc.).   Accordingly, the definition of language competence and its development has come embrace a wide range of linguistic, academic, social, cultural, and strategic abilities. More importantly, language is a code of communication that has multiple, simultaneous functions and are as complex as the contextual demands of the communicative act at hand.   Consider the different levels and definitions of the linguistic competence in the communicative sense which include:

(1) Grammatical Competence which involves the mastery of various language aspects, rules and grammar notions;

(2) Socio-linguistic Competence which involves the effective use and application of social rules in any given discourse activity as dictated by the contextual demands of the speech event;

(3) Discourse Competence which entails utilizing levels of syntactic and semantic forms to carry out a meaningful and coherent communicative task (both in spokes on written); and

(4) Strategic Competence which requires an integration of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies (i.e. verbal and non-verbal) to perform effective communicative tasks.

There is an interplay among these avenues of competence where one without the other may be less likely to result in a successful communicative activity. In other words, the ecological processes of the interaction can be manifested in any communicative act dictated by such interface. Spielmann (2006) has depicted this process in the following diagram (see Figure 2):
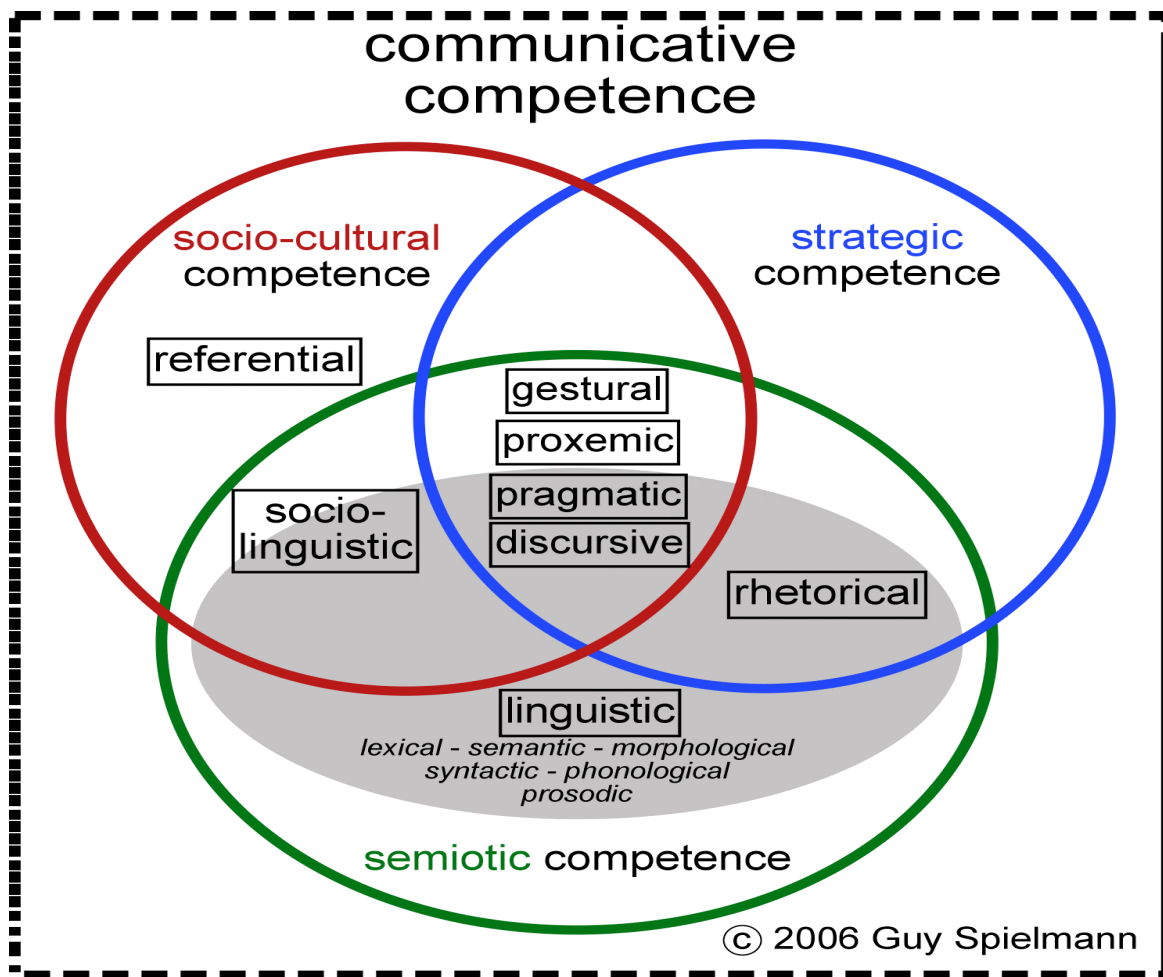

Figure 2: Spielmann's Diagram

The study of language acquisition, within the field of linguistics, has evolved significantly over the past several decades given the technological advances and global dynamics. After all, language is an indispensable part of the human interaction and is key to

communication across world cultures and civilizations. Consequently, the push for multilingualism, global literacy, and multiculturalism is seen as natural outcome that can be enhanced by a solid foundation that accounts for understanding how languages are acquired and how effectively they be taught. The next section focuses on the pedagogical value and impact in light of the principles and assumptions gleaned from the various theories and views on language acquisition.

Contributions to Second/Foreign Language Pedagogy

The long studied field of language acquisition has impacted education in many ways. However, in two main fronts, such influence can be traced: the foundational philosophical base, and the pedagogical practice. Both domains are equally vital for maximizing learning/teaching outcomes in schools everywhere.

At the philosophical, foundational levels, several underpinnings have been established as a result of these investigations and studies in second language acquisition. The conceptual awareness about how language is learned is seen through the various principles that have been delineated based on these efforts. Below is a summary of some of the widely circulated principles that have philosophical and practical appeal. They also serve as underlying assumptions about how second language learning takes place. They include:

Position #1: *Understanding the process of language acquisition in general will help in understanding the process of learning second, third … and other languages;*

Position #2: *Universal similarities in the way humans acquire and learn any language, including a second or foreign language, exist and surface in the process;*

Position #3: *Language acquisition relates to natural human needs and wants, including all forms of intelligence, for surviving and thriving at any time anywhere;*

Position #4*: Language acquisition is associated not only with linguistic faculties and abilities but cognitive physiological, cultural, spiritual, social, and other abilities as well; and*

Position #5*: Language complexity and its vital role in human interaction can better be understood by examining multiple perspectives and frameworks, rather than one at the expense of the other.*

These propositions and others can formulate a blueprint for evaluating the education treatments in second language classrooms.   They can also serve as criteria to evaluate language learning, teaching, and assessment.   Moreover, they can function as a conceptual framework that can provide a sound rationale for examining the crucial place language occupies in schools and society at large.

While language is a key social capital (see Bourdieu, 1998; Viniti, Gopinathan, & Yongbing, 2007), it is also an educational capital given its vital place in the curriculum and instruction processes in schools.   Of course this is not a new concept.   Over forty years ago, for example, Bullock's (1975) report "*A language for Life"* forms the impetus of language across content and curricular activities.   Originally based on this notion, the Language Across Curriculum (LAC) approaches have evolved.   The premise that underlies these approaches is two-fold: first, language transcends content and academic areas of the curriculum regardless of what the subject matter may be.   The second aspect involves the role of teachers generally regardless of the subject they teach; i.e. *every teacher is a language teacher*.   Thus s/he should be cognizant of this fact and their metalinguistic awareness is equally important to their expertise in the content they teach.   The byproduct of this school of thought can be seen in the current trends and practices in second language acquisition today as well as in literacy programs and initiatives.   The focus is no longer on language skills alone but rather on how language

development is keenly linked to academic and literacy skills that transcend reading and writing to embrace mastery of the content being taught in schools and beyond. The opposite also holds true; i.e. the level of knowledge acquisition can be a reflection of the levels of linguistic mastery and language competence students possess.

At the pedagogical level, implications and practical applications have been drawn from these theories and in many instances provide a rationale for instructional choices and decisions in second language classrooms. These models have also impacted the curricular activities and learning/teaching strategies in linguistically diverse settings. In fact, the standards based movement has integrated these second language acquisition principles in educational frameworks and programs. Various state standards and frameworks have integrated research on second language acquisition to create benchmarks, guidelines and criteria that govern the curriculum planning and instruction in schools. In examining the various frameworks and standards at the state level, one can find how second language acquisition principles have become to constitute the core basis for adaptations and accommodations needed for English language learners and the linguistically and culturally diverse in general.

Implications and Conclusions

The array of models and approaches to language acquisition serves as a solid foundation from which pedagogical practice can be driven. The balance between theory and practice should be constantly achieved. On one hand, teachers in second language classrooms engage in risk-taking to apply in creative ways what the theory may entail. On the other hand, they also implement innovative practices where theory may be lacking. Nonetheless, the rationale for instructional practices in second language classrooms should be connected to philosophical

underpinnings that characterize the complexity of language development. Teachers may find eclectic approaches to be appealing given the choices such approaches allow; yet, such eclecticism should be enlightened and informed based on the ecological and contextual demands of the learning/teaching situations. Theories of learning over the years have been helpful in the process of integrating sound rationales about instructional choices and decisions in linguistically diverse classrooms. They also have helped teachers and educators to revisit certain practices that may be mechanical and simplistic to say the least.

In planning instruction in second language classrooms, one will find it difficult to stick to one method or approach. This is especially true since language development involves building a variety of skills that transcend linguistic abilities to embrace cognitive, social, cultural and academic one. The key factor in making pedagogical choices revolves around the premise of differentiation that allows integrating an informed eclectic approach. Eclecticism requires synthesizing various workable strategies and techniques. Such synthesis should draw on a comprehensive and thoughtful integration of methods and pedagogies that have a sound rationale that justifies instructional choices and decisions. It should also stem from the complexities involves language learning and development.

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