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Language learning as appropriation: how linguistic resources are recycled and regenerated

Contemporary conceptualizations of language and mind have presented serious challenges to traditional theories and models of second and foreign language learning. The theories that have considered learning as an individual process and language as a formal system the learners are supposed to internalize are now challenged by views that highlight the dynamicity of language and that see learning as a socially and cognitively shared process. Drawing on dialogical theory of the Bakhtin Circle in particular, we illustrate in our paper how language learning can be reimagined as appropriation of shared linguistic resources.

Keywords: Dialogism, second language, foreign language, language learning, distributed cognition

1 Introduction: dialogism and second/foreign language learning and development

The paper discusses the contribution of the Bakhtin Circle to the conceptualization of second and foreign language learning and development (for an introduction to the work of the Bakhtin Circle, see, e.g., Brandist 2002; for “neo-dialogical writings”, see, e.g., Rommetveit 1992; Lähteenmäki & Dufva 1998; Linell 1998, 2009). Further, we add some comments on second and foreign language pedagogies. Although focusing here on the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Voloshinov (1973, 1976), we are also influenced by the Vygotskian, sociocultural tradition of second and foreign language research (see, Lantolf 2000; Lantolf & Thorne 2006; Johnson 2004). Further, we refer to recent views on distributed language and cognition (e.g. Cowley 2009). Against this backdrop, we will examine second and foreign language learning and development from a perspective that reconceptualizes both ‘language’ and ‘learning’, and that aims at giving an account of learning as a process in which individual learners appropriate – and thus recycle – linguistic resources.

Here, we argue against **cognitivism**, typical of the mentalist and individualist orientation of the early Anglo-American second language acquisition (SLA) research that started in the 1970s. Drawing on Chomskian, rationalist arguments, language learning then came to be defined as ‘acquisition’ and/or ‘internalization’ (for a criticism of cognitivism, see Still & Costall 1991; Dufva 1998). However, we also argue that the social turn, popular since the 1990s, may be unhelpful for investigating and explaining learning if the cognitive aspect is excluded (see also Dufva 2010).

Our own argument is **socio-cognitive**: we see learning as an activity in which the social environment intertwines with the cognitive resources of the learner. Dialogism, as a theory about human consciousness, aims at dissolving the Cartesian dualism between ‘social’ and ‘cognitive’: human meaning-making world cannot be explained without giving an account of both aspects that work side by side. As language learners, people are inevitably engaged in social practices, but at the same time these practices are accompanied with cognitive activity. To simplify, in doing something, people also think. Social and cognitive are in a reciprocal relationship, “feeding” each other, or “merging” with each other as Voloshinov (1973: 39) argued. This view is our axiomatic starting point and defines our view of language learning.

Furthermore, language learners do not function in the social world *in abstracto*, but in a material and physical world they meet as embodied persons and in concrete events in which they participate. Drawing on Voloshinov’s (1973: 26, 90–91) views on materiality and embodiment, we argue that theories of language learning need to give an account of this. As language use implies physically-based activities (e.g. articulated

speech; writing as bodily, manual activity) and as also material artifacts (e.g. books, keyboards, mobile phones) are used, we need to adjust our theories of language learning accordingly.

The contributions of Bakhtin and Voloshinov extend way beyond language learning and teaching, to philosophical issues of human language, culture and consciousness. Adopting them here for the purposes of second/foreign language learning research, we refer particularly to Bakhtin's (2004) paper on language pedagogy and to Voloshinov's (1973) explicit comments on learning, teaching and pedagogy. Within language learning research, dialogical views have been discussed by many scholars (e.g. Cazden 1989; Wertsch 1990; Hall, Vitanova & Marchenkova 2005; Johnson 2004; Dufva 2003; Dufva & Alanen 2005; Dufva, Suni, Aro & Salo 2010; Dufva 2011). The Bakhtinian perspective to pedagogy has been discussed by e.g. Dysthe (1996) and Matusov (2009).

2 Towards a new understanding of language learning: dialogism meets contemporary applied linguistics

The 20th century mainstream conceptualization of language has become widely contested in the current debates in different areas of language studies, e.g. in sociolinguistics, critical applied linguistics and the framework of distributed language and cognition (see, e.g. Makoni & Pennycook 2007; Cowley 2009). These contemporary views are often highly commensurable with dialogical arguments on language (e.g. Linell 2009; Dufva *et al.* 2010).

Some features of the mainstream concept of language that have been challenged are 1) the Saussurean-based idea of (abstract) language system, 2) the Chomskyan mentalist view of language, 3) the hidden nationalist agenda that underlies the notion of a unitary language, and 4) the written language bias, present in the linguistic inquiry and its units of analysis (Linell 2005). These very same conceptualizations have also served as an implicit agenda in second language acquisition research, and they have also influenced language education policies, language pedagogy and assessment of language skills (for relevant literature and a more detailed discussion, see Dufva, Aro, Suni & Salo 2011).

In short, the starting point of second/foreign language research has frequently been the assumption that learners "internalize" knowledge similar to that of the first language speakers and both have been postulated as consisting of static, context-free rules of grammar and items of lexicon (see, e.g. Gass & Selinker 2001: 5–11). Further, in curricula and classrooms, languages have been regarded as national languages, and

they have been taught through literacy-based mediational means and, accordingly, assessed as academic literacy-based skills (see also Dufva *et al.* 2011).

In Bakhtinian terms, the mainstream view of language, which can be called monological (see also Linell 2009), has affected deeply the conceptualizations of second/foreign language research and also the classroom practices. But have we been on the right track? Is the monological view of a single static language system really how language should be presented to learners? As Pennycook (2001: 6–8) observes, the concepts proposed by applied linguists are not just theory – they have consequences to how learners relate to classroom practices, interaction and themselves as learners. In what follows, we will connect contemporary discussion to dialogical arguments considering their relevance in the context of second/foreign language research and pedagogy.

3 Recent debates on language: six motifs

First, there are arguments saying that language should not be regarded as an object or objects, but rather, as **eventing**: reformulations that oppose the reification of language describe it as communicative activity (Thorne & Lantolf 2007), action/doing (van Lier 2007), or languaging (Maturana 1978) (see also Dufva *et al.* 2010). This view, that downplays the notion of language as a system, highlights the fact that language is not actually just used in the social and material practices – such as speaking, reading, writing, texting, chatting – but that language is to be identified with those practices.

Similarly, both Bakhtin and Voloshinov emphasized the event nature of language: ‘language as system’ is just an artifact produced by linguists as Voloshinov (1973) argued. Further, there is no evidence for the argument that a theoretical description of language like this should be equivalent with the processes by which language users perceive and produce language activity. As radical as it may seem, it follows that there is no need to postulate an abstract internalized system (of words and grammatical rules). Rather, we need to find new, more dynamic, ways in which to approach language users’ capacity to perceive, produce, and learn language. To simplify, language learning might be seen as a process of participation in which one learns how to do things with language while the proficiency of the users might be seen as know-how, rather than know-that knowledge.

Second, there are arguments that forefront the deep **contextuality** of language (e.g. language as local practices; Pennycook 2010). Also dialogism suggests that language is intimately tied with its societal, interactive and individual contexts. As Voloshinov (1973: 70) says “words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology”. Thus, reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian notion of meaning

as use, the dialogical argument suggests that, without a context, words and utterances *do not mean*. This assumption shifts the focus of examination from the forms of language to the meaning and function of language: or, to use a Hymesian formulation, to how, where, why, when, by whom and to whom language is used. This applies to learning and teaching: as Voloshinov (1973: 69) notes, no teaching practice should alienate language from its context and students should “become acquainted with each linguistic form only in concrete contexts and situations”.

Third, and relatedly, language is argued to be inherently relational or **dialogical** in that it is a connector between human agents. The Bakhtinian metaphor of dialogue is a notion that includes concrete language use but extends it to refer to the uninterrupted chain of “questions and answers” that characterize human existence (e.g. Bakhtin 1984: 293). Regarded from this perspective, utterances involve both responsivity and addressivity: they orient both towards past and future (see also Linell 2009). Hence, in linguistic theorizing, in classroom practices and in how language proficiency is assessed, we should shy away from views that see language use as individual production, or, a monologue. Rather, language use should be seen taught and assessed through the notion of dialogue and co-production.

Fourth, while language needs to be considered both from the point of its forms and its functions, there is the question of primacy. The other-oriented nature of the dialogical approach to language also suggests that language use does not primarily refer to the ability to produce formal utterances or turns in conversation, but rather, it should be seen as a chain of meaningful and functional utterances: “we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on” (Voloshinov 1973: 70). Thus learning to use language does not refer to participation only, but to **meaningful** participation in more particular.

To continue, the fifth point is that the notion of unified, singular and homogeneous language, based on the idea of national language and its written standard, needs to be replaced. Many contemporary authors are using Bakhtin’s (1981: 291) term **heteroglossia** that refers to a variety of different genres, registers and usages within language community. In contemporary usage, concepts such as translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge 2010) refer to multilingual practices that similarly challenge the territorial notion of language. This perspective also suggests that the learners’ goal should be redefined as the ability of learners to operate with a variety of usages, registers, dialects and languages – not with a single, monological, ‘language’.

Finally, there is a sixth issue frequently discussed. Dialogism – similarly to contemporary research – argues for the need to study concrete use of language. Therefore also **materiality** is important (Voloshinov 1973: 26, 90–91). This assumption can be associated with the recent research interest in multimodality, which has

expanded the focus of language studies beyond investigating 'verbal' language. Today, it is generally implied that language practices inherently involve also other elements than lexico-grammatical: e.g. the prosodic features and bodily communication in spoken interaction or various visual and auditory elements in texts. Also, this has implications to research and pedagogy of second and foreign languages. It is also in this sense that learners do not study a single language but, rather, multimodal practices.

4 Reformulating language learning: five new proposals

4.1 Language learning as appropriation of linguistic resources

Rejecting the notion of a single monolithic language and learning as internalization, we are faced with finding new formulations. If the unified, singular and homogeneous standard language as an object of study and learning is a myth, and if the arguments above are taken seriously, this has consequences both for theorizing and teaching.

Drawing on the discussion above, language could be redefined as **resources** that are situated and therefore multimodal and multilingual in nature. While all language use means **recycling** the community resources (Sunni 2008) and while linguistic resources keep materializing and rematerializing in various connections in the form of speech, conversations, texts, media, signs, etc., also learning could, accordingly, be described as **appropriation** of these resources. This would refer to the learners' growing ability to utilize different linguistic resources for participating in linguistic practices. For learners, linguistic resources are **distributed** across environments, artifacts and human agents (Cowley 2009; see also Dufva 2013). Similar observations have also been made in the early communication strategy studies that recognized the significance of appeals for assistance in second language interaction (see Tarone 1981; Pietilä 1983). The resources turn into **affordances** when the learner notices them, relates to them and understands them as learning opportunities (van Lier 2007).

4.2 Language proficiency as personal language repertoire

To continue, the above view also indicates that the outcome of the learning process, language proficiency, is not a static set of linguistic items and rules, stored in the mental memory storage. Rather, we suggest that proficiency should be redefined as **dynamic and situated skills** that help learners to recognize a variety of semiotic resources in their environments (see also Aro 2013). Thus, the knowledge is dynamic and can also be described as "skillful linguistic action", echoing Cowley's (2012) rewording of SLA (second language acquisition). Similarly, the knowledge needs to be regarded as situated, both

because different contexts require different types of skills, and also, because the skills are, to a degree, modality-specific. This means giving up the notion of static and decontextual proficiency and replacing it by the notion of **(personal) language repertoires** that are multilingual and multimodal in nature (see also Blommaert & Backus 2011).

4.3 Language learning as distributed (inter)activity

The view of learning as appropriation of linguistic resources can be also associated with frameworks that understand human action as inherently connected with its environments. Sociocultural theorizing, activity theory, systemic psychology, and ecological psychology are all examples (for a more detailed discussion and literature, see Dufva 2013). In a nutshell, the argument is that human cognition reaches beyond the “internal” capacities of an individual, and hence, context should not be considered as an external scene of learning, but as part of learning (see also Järvillehto 2012). Also, language learning can be regarded as **distributed** activity (see, e.g. Hutchins 1995), or **interactivity** (Steffensen 2009, 2013) – that is, as activity that emerges between participating human agents, available artifacts and the on-going action.

Thus language learning can be re-imagined as a process in which the learners engage with their material environment and artifacts, the on-going social action and other people present, and in which the individual agents’ own cognitive activity gets fused with the social, observable action. Learning can happen – or not happen – in a language classroom or in a spontaneous interaction, but one should carefully consider the constraints and affordances provided by each particular event, tasks and environment that are, as argued, part of learning. One can learn with the help of other people, e.g. native speakers, who both provide resources and give scaffolding to the learner (Suni 2008), but also with the help of artifacts. For example, in writing an essay in a foreign language, the learner does not work alone with his cognitive resources but with the help of various tools such as dictionaries, grammars, spell-checkers and on-line resources.

4.4 Language learning as agentic activity

The socio-cognitive and distributed views do not undermine the role of the human agents, however (Dufva & Aro forthcoming). We consider it highly problematic to explain the notion of learning itself, if we do not consider its agentic aspect: the capabilities, resources and experiences of people as language learners (see also Sullivan & McCarthy 2004). In social interaction, language resources are constantly being recycled, and this happens only because of the contribution of human agents who keep the process in action. Thus it is newcomers to the linguistic communities, whether infants learning

their mother tongue, or migrants and other second/foreign language learners, who help to keep the practices alive and transfer them to new generations or groups.

Also, it is absolutely evident that second/foreign language learners do not encounter new situations as empty slates. They always bring their own cognitive resources – and their own experiences and beliefs with them (Dufva 2003; Aro 2009). Thus learners participate in situations and encounter concrete linguistic usages as persons who have a background and language biography or trajectory accumulated during their life span, they each have their own position towards learning and studying the language and they also have their own particular cognitive and personal strengths and weaknesses. However, we do not regard language learners as agents in the sense of Cartesian rationalist individuals or the generalized learners of the cognitivist paradigm, but social, cognitive and embodied agents who navigate and operate in various concrete environments appropriating resources from their particular position and according to their particular needs and feelings (see also Dufva 2012).

4.5 Language learning as mimetic behavior

However, it is evident that to rethink learning, we need to be able to examine the process in much more detail than this. To understand how a resource in the environment is actually recycled, or how it is appropriated by the learner, one needs to consider how the agents actually connect with the environment and by what processes they turn the resources to their own social and cognitive capital.

One core process here may be the link between perceiving and producing an activity: the mimetic behavior. The capacity to imitate others may be a feature that developed very early in the past of the mankind and it may also be a central mechanism in the transpersonal and transgenerational mediation of language and other cultural practices (e.g. Donald 1991). As recent neurophysiological research shows, there is a neural network, mirror neurons, that seems to be responsible for the capacity of imitating others (Arbib 2012). Within language studies, different functions of mimetic behavior and its different interpretations and classifications of mimesis have been discussed by, e.g., Tomasello (2003), Cowley (2004), Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 166–176) and Gross (2006).

It has also been shown that language learners may acquire new elements by imitating native speakers, but not by making exact copies but mainly by adding or omitting something (Sunni 2008). As Bakhtin (1981: 293–294) says, our words are borrowed from others and are “half someone else’s”. However, when “populated with our own intention”, they become appropriated, our own. Our background always has an

influence on how we interpret and use language, and thus also on how our own voice will be like.

5 Dialogical pedagogies: away from scholasticism

To conclude with, the dialogical approach changes the notion of language and it also changes many fundamental metaphors of learning, memory, and, indeed, of human mind. To use new concepts and terms may have an influence in language learners' conceptualizations. If we, as teachers, use words such as "(inter)activity", "doing", and "participation" it might be a message in itself. If we understand learning as deeply interactive and collaborative in nature, this might – and should – influence the classroom (for collaboration in learning and teaching, see also Pietilä & Järvinen 2002; Pietilä 2003). It is evident that dialogical pedagogy (see, e.g. Dysthe 1996; Matusov 2009) resonates with other perspectives such as action based teaching (van Lier 2007), language awareness (van Lier 1995), learning in informal contexts (Benson & Reinders 2012) and learning in virtual environments (Zheng & Newgarden 2012).

With the enhancement of the learners' agency as the main goal (see also Dufva & Aro forthcoming) and the development and sophistication of their linguistic repertoires in mind, the pedagogies should nurse aspects that encourage participation, awareness and reflection – and urge learners towards recycling the linguistic resources by creative copying. Borrowing Voloshinov's (1973: 81) idea of learning as entering "upon the stream of communication", we see learning and teaching as action. But it is also meaningful and contextual action – even when the object of study is vocabulary or grammar. Bakhtin (2004: 12) warned against separating the formal knowledge from its use: "When grammar is isolated from the semantic and stylistic aspects of speech, it inevitably turns into scholasticism". Today, this seems to be as good an advice as any.

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