Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation

Evaluating Classroom Communication: In Support of Emergent and Authentic Frameworks in Second Language Assessment

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This paper addresses sociocultural theory and pedagogy (Vygotsky 1978, Lantolf 2000) in the second language classroom, particularly as it relates to student assessment. While teaching practices may be evolving to reflect the theory, methods of assessment are still largely the same: based on *a priori* structures and grammar (Hopper and Thompson 1993). Authentic assessment (Wiggins 1990) and instructional conversations (Tharp and Gallimore 1988) are introduced as better methods for student assessment in language classrooms that operate within the sociocultural framework.

Introduction

VanPatten (1998) points out that there is a gap between second language acquisition (SLA) theory and classroom practice due to varying interpretations of the concept 'communicative.' One version of 'communicative' is text driven; communicative activities are provided as the end result of a chapter or segment. Students first 'learn' the material, then they use it to communicate[1]. According to this definition, communicative tasks are a measure of student learning rather than a means by which to acquire language.

An alternative version of 'communicative' is suggested by activity theory (Vygotsky 1978, Wertsch 1991), in which contextualized communicative tasks lead to the acquisition of a language. Indeed, VanPatten's (1998) other definition of 'communicative' ties language acquisition to communicative events in which there is a negotiation of meaning that does not rely on an *a priori* knowledge of grammar. According to this definition, communication is not the result of knowing a grammar; rather, grammar is acquired through communication.

Beliefs about the role and concept of grammar in communication and interaction influence not only SLA theories but also the practices of many foreign language classrooms. Following an overview of sociocultural theory, this article will examine two prevalent views of grammar in foreign language classrooms and explore the assessment implications of each.

Sociocultural Framework

Our minds are mediated by the social, historical, and cultural contexts that surround us at any given moment (Luria 1981). As the main players in the worlds that we inhabit, we change and influence the contexts to suit our understandings and purposes or those of others whom we believe to be valuable. In order to change or influence the worlds in which we live, we use language as the main tool to help us appropriate knowledge or understanding (Volosinov 1973).

According to Vygotsky (1978), Lantolf (2000), and Wertsch (1991), speaking and thinking are not one in the same. Through language, however, we can assess (in everyday contexts) what may be inside someone's mind. Language may be observed as utterance, dialogue, or discourse (Mantero 2002a, 2002b). An utterance, according to Bakhtin (1986), carries with it the possibility of being responded to, and, in turn, creating dialogue. Basically, an utterance is a single spoken "sentence" without a response made by a speaker. It is when the utterance is responded to by another speaker that dialogue is created, and therefore extends beyond the one-sided (monologic). Interaction remains at the dialogue level (i.e., dialogic) if the communication between speakers revolves around one idea. Discourse emerges when dialogue assists in clarifying a new concept. For example, we can exchange utterances (dialogue) about a car in a second language and still remain at the dialogue level of communication. But when we begin to talk about how a car affords us more freedom and how freedom is appreciated by all, then the dialogue surrounding the car has now turned into a discourse on freedom.

True dialogue stems from a negotiation of meaning, an attempt to understand, or convince someone of, a point of view. It

does not have a pre-appointed end to it, such as successfully ordering from a menu in an in-class role play. Instead, true dialogue furthers discourse because those involved are using language as a tool in goal-directed action (Tharp and Gallimore 1988, Wells 1999). Within a sociocultural framework, the task of ordering a meal in restaurant would be more effective, discursively, if the students had to negotiate what type of restaurant and food as well as any activities that might happen afterwards. The dialogue of "ordering dinner" would then become embedded within a larger discourse that emerged over time through unrehearsed dialogue that served to activate cognitive processes involved in decision making.

Vygtosky (1978) operationalized dialogue and discourse into areas that he termed the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). These two concepts are critical for understanding how to approach students in a sociocultural framework.

Basically, the ZAD is what people can do by themselves and the ZPD is what a person can do with assistance from a knowledgeable other. When you go to the corner store for a gallon of milk, you don't need any assistance from others, but when you visit a friend's new house for the first time, you might go with someone who has already been there so that he or she can direct you. Although simplified, this example helps illustrate the differences between the ZAD and the ZPD. It is also important to note that just because a person helps another reach the ZPD once, it doesn't mean that the first person will remember how to get there. In order for the individual ZPD to turn into a ZAD, there must be contextualized, supported practice and action (mental and physical). And here is where the use of tools comes into play. Imagine that you need to go to your friend's new house again, but can't remember how to find the way home. Your friend can't accompany you, so he draws you a map. This map is your tool for working through your ZPD. It replaces the language that you used when you had your friend in the car with you. The more you visit your friend's new house, the less you will need the map or have to ask for directions. Eventually, you'll be able to find the new house without any problems. At this moment, metaphorically at least, your ZAD will have expanded and created a new ZPD (for example, Where can you go from your friend's new house with their help?).

A major implication for language assessment is how we might assess students' use of language if they are mediating through their own continually expanding ZPDs. How will we hold true to the meanings of dialogue and discourse within a language classroom?

Emergent and *a priori* Grammars

Shohamy (2000) states that a reality of foreign language classroom tests is that they identify not what knowing a language means, but what knowing a language means in testing situations. Imagine a typical testing situation in a contemporary classroom. If you envision a classroom filled with students bent over their desks, furiously filling in blanks, listening to a passage then circling the 'right answer,' scribbling verb endings in the margins beside the matching vocabulary section, then you saw the typical assessment methods based on the notion of *a priori* grammar that are prevalent in language curricula. In this situation, knowledge of linguistic structures signals what is understood as a 'communicative student," that is, a monologic student instead of a discursive student. Such a monologic student has not reached beyond his or her ZAD and attempted to expand it. This student stays within the confines that a priori grammar instruction places upon him or her and which is supported, and enforced by, the assessment methods that focus on *a priori* grammar.

If assessment is based on *a priori* grammar knowledge, then the role and process of understanding contexts and culture is diminished and this may lead to a lack of dialogue and discourse within a language classroom. As Saville-Troike (1991) mentions, cultural and contextual knowledge assists students in negotiating meaning, thus entering into dialogue and discourse. Think, for example, of the cultural scripts we use when we go to the bank, order a pizza, or buy a car.

The notion of grammar being acquired discursively through negotiating communicative tasks is consistent with sociocultural theory. Hopper (1993) refers to it as Emergent Grammar. According to this view, grammar is seen as incomplete and in process or emergent. It is not a fixed set of rules one must know in order to do well on a test because the current chapter 'covered' the past tense. Meaning is taken to be contextual. Symbols, linguistic or not, do not require a grammar to be meaningful.

The popular view of grammar in many foreign language classrooms and texts is, however, that which Hopper labels *a priori*. This *a priori* grammar is perfectly monologic, and at the utterance level of classroom interaction within a sociocultural framework (Wells 1999). In order to understand or learn an a priori grammar, we need not involve ourselves in discourse. *a priori* grammar knowledge is easily assessed in classrooms and is used to label students as being less or more 'communicative' than others or 'knowing more' Spanish, French, German, etc.

Littlewood (1980) assists us in viewing the validity of framing our assessment methods through Emergent Grammar by defining linguistic structure as a form that appears through action and interaction. Meaning is not the product of automatic, predisposed blueprints of language. Meaning is contingent on dialogue (Bereiter 1994). Assessment under this view should be dialogic and discursive and allow for an expansion of the ZAD linguistically and cognitively. Further, doing so will allow for more communication and negotiation of meaning that will produce second language acquisition. Two methods for assessing students-instructional conversation and authentic assessment-- consistent with

Emergent Grammar and sociocultural theory are described below.

Instructional Conversations

Tharp and Gallimore (1989) define an approach to teaching that, in line with sociocultural thought, may be used to assess students while in the process of thinking and learning. Focusing on the role of the teacher in assisting performance, they further clarify the concept of scaffolding (Wertsch 1991), which encompasses the following seven activities: modeling, providing feedback, applying contingency management (rewards and punishments), directing, questioning, explaining, and structuring tasks. Each of these activities is built within and around the students' ZAD and ZPD, therefore making assessment a part of the process of learning and thinking. Tharp and Gallimore clarify the instructional conversation as such:

> *Parents and teachers who engage in instructional conversations are assuming that the (student) may have something to say beyond the known answers in the head of the adult. They occasionally extract from the (student) a 'correct' answer, but to grasp the communicative intent… adults need to listen carefully, and… to adjust their responses to assist (their) efforts* (p.24).

A student's grammar is dynamically assessed throughout discourse and communication when using any one (or a combination of more than one) of the seven approaches to instruction that Tharp and Gallimore propose to assist the students in discursive, goal-directed action. The instructional conversation, as outlined, provides a framework for this type of assessment and interaction.

Authentic Assessment

To provide an effective method of assessing students' language and cognition, it is helpful to outline a method that has been proposed by Wiggins (1990) and Archbald and Newman (1989): authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is any type of assessment that requires students to demonstrate skills and competencies that realistically represent problems and situations likely to be encountered in daily life. When authentic assessment is placed into the context of a language classroom, what follows is a cognitively more demanding method of assessment that has to include more discourse and reliance on emergent grammar by both the student and the instructor because, as Wiggins states, authentic assessment offers opportunities to plan and revise dialogue and discourse, collaborate with others, and help students 'play' within contextualized worlds inside of the classroom that are based on the culture(s) of the language being studied. Given the very nature of this type of assessment, it complements the sociocultural theory to which many language classrooms are attempting to subscribe.

Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Assessment of language learning can be understood as evaluating either the process of language learning or the product of studying a second language. Instructors need to have a clear vision of what they are assessing: process or product. This may translate into formative or summative assessment in the language classroom.

Traditionally, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language's English as a Second Language (ESL) Standards are tools that are used for summative assessment on *a priori* structures. This limited use places unnecessary constraints on valuable rubrics that the field of language education has relied on and used for a decades. Why evaluate only what a student can do at a given moment of linguistic proficiency with *a priori* constructs? If we keep in mind the goals of authentic assessment and instructional conversations, then rubrics such as the OPI and the ESL Standards can be implemented in a formative manner. Language learning is a process that involves specific feedback from assessment instruments about the student's potential language proficiency as well as actual. When placed in an emergent framework (as discussed earlier), the OPI and ESL Standards assist the students in understanding what they have learned and what they may still need on focus on.

Viewing linguistic proficiency as emergent allows for the assessment methods to be applied in a more formative aspect, and this in turn allows for a truer picture of second language acquisition and learning within the classroom environment. New teachers and teacher-educators will have to decide whether to focus their assessment skills and rubrics to the student's ZAD or ZPD. Assessment based solely in the ZAD focuses on the *a priori* constructs mentioned earlier and often becomes driven by texts and grammar structure. By focusing assessment in the ZPD, an instructor has to take into account the cognitive and linguistic abilities and skills that a student may have, which allows for more self-expression, creation of meaning, and negotiation during communication.

Note

[1] This paper focuses on verbal communication or production rather than written communication and reading because verbal communication requires speakers to negotiate meaning with each other consistent with sociocultural theory.

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