# Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching

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## What practice is not

My title is “Discursive Practice in Language Teaching and Learning,” but before I start I would like to make a truth-in-advertising statement about the word “practice.” Many of us who have been language teachers know a lot about practice. For instance, in his introduction to a recent collection of research articles on practice in a second language, Robert DeKeyser (2007) explained what he meant by the term. For DeKeyser, practice involves specific activities in a second language that learners engage in, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language. For DeKeyser and for many cognitive psychologists, most of the activities included in practice involve repetition of the same or closely similar performance in routines.

## What practice is

So here is my truth-in-advertising statement. By practice, I mean something very different. My take on practice comes not from cognitive psychology but is grounded in the work of sociologists and cultural anthropologists. Some names are Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Michel de Certeau. In the tradition of sociology and cultural anthropology that Bourdieu, Giddens, and de Certeau have founded, practice is performance, practice is action in the living world, practice is immediate here and now, practice is inseparable from context. The trouble is as soon as we begin to study practice, we have to study a record of practice and a record of a practice is fundamentally different from the practice itself. Let me share with you one example of the difference between practice and record. It is an example that I have adapted from the French social theorist, Michel de Certeau. In his essay “Walking in the City,” de Certeau (1984) reflected on his experience of looking down at the streets of New York City from the top of a

skyscraper. When I was in New York City earlier this year, I remembered de Certeau's essay. I walked the streets of course, but mostly I traveled around Manhattan by subway. Traveling around the New York subway is a practice, with which I am sure many people are familiar. As a reminder, Clip 1 is a record of people riding the subway[1].

Clip 1. Riding the subway

At a particular time, a traveler on the subway is in a particular place and is traveling in a particular way—waiting on the platform, riding a train, negotiating a turnstile, going up or down an escalator. The traveler has a particular goal in mind—a goal of arriving somewhere, of meeting someone, or just of keeping out of the cold. It is possible to make a record of a journey on the subway with the help of a map. Figure 1 is a subway map from the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and it is possible to trace on the map the route that a traveler took to get from one place to another. But the map is an abstraction from the person's practice of traveling. The map has a context of its own but is not a representation of who went

where when, or of how or why they went there. It is a representation only of the route that a traveler took.

Figure 1. A map of part of the New York subway

De Certeau wrote about walking in the city and I have adapted his words to the subway. Practices of riding the subway can be traced on MTA maps in such a way to record their paths and their trajectories …

> But these thick or thin lines only refer, like words, to the absence of what passed by. […] They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of a surface projection. […] These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. (p. 97)

But the traveler is not a superhero, free to go wherever he or she likes. There are lines in the subway that the traveler can take or not take; there are walls that cannot be surmounted and

passages that direct the traveler's feet; and there are stations where the traveler can change trains and stations where the traveler can exit the subway. All these can be represented on the map as constraints—constraints that describe a limited number of routes, but to the traveler they are affordances and impedances, environments that allow the traveler to go in one direction and not in another, environments that the traveler negotiates tactically, on the fly. The practice of traveling the subway, like an individual's performance in a discursive practice, is situated and ongoing; it is a journey, a lived experience within an environment. The map is a record of a journey. The journey is a performance by someone who traveled somewhere at some time by some means and for some reason. Like grammatical constraints on practice, the map is a different representation entirely, located *nowhere* and *nowhen*.

## Practice and records of practice

Maps, like all records, are representations, products of cultural historical circumstances, products of the technology of recording in a particular culture at a particular historical time. Here are a few more examples of technologies of recording, contrasted with the practices that they recorded.

Figure 2 is an image of an oracle bone from Shang dynasty China. In ancient China, when a ruler wanted advice, he would ask the spirits of his ancestors and other supernatural beings a question that was written on an oracle bone. The bone was then heated and the pattern of cracks in the bone was interpreted as an answer to the question. The divined answer was sometimes then marked either "auspicious" or "inauspicious," and the ruler occasionally added a "prognostication", which was his reading on the nature of the omen. The action of divination is the practice; the oracle bone recorded the practice.

**Figure 2. A Shang dynasty oracle bone from the Shanghai Museum**

Figure 3 is a written record from 10th century England. Anglo-Saxon England was an essentially oral culture, and records of oral practices were made by scribes on specially prepared animal skins. In the Anglo-Saxon world, there were many metaphors that contrasted the spoken word with the written record. Written words were “mouthless speakers,” “dead lifegivers,” “dumb knowledge-bearers.” To the Anglo-Saxons, the written record was a dead, dumb, limited thing. In contrast, speech itself was not a thing, not a record, but a *practice*, which writing takes and alienates from the world in which it was produced. As the Anglo-Saxon scholar Kathleen O’Brien O’Keeffe (1990) wrote, “the technology which preserves also kills” (p. 54).

**Figure 3. The beginning of Maxims I from The Exeter Book,**
**an Anglo-Saxon record made in the latter half of the tenth century**

## The technology of recording

With 21st century technology, we are not only able to make written records, but we can also make still pictures, sound recordings, and movies. Many parents with young children are committed to keeping records of their children. Figure 4 and Clips 2 and 3 illustrate the technology of contemporary record keeping of the practices of American infants.

**Figure 4. A still picture captures a visual image but not sound.**

**Clip 2. An audio record focuses attention on sound.**

**Clip 3. A video record omits the social and institutional context of practice.**

Although the technology is different today, the recording of practice—its transformation from an immediate performance, an action in the living world into a thing—has not changed. The modern technology which preserves still kills.

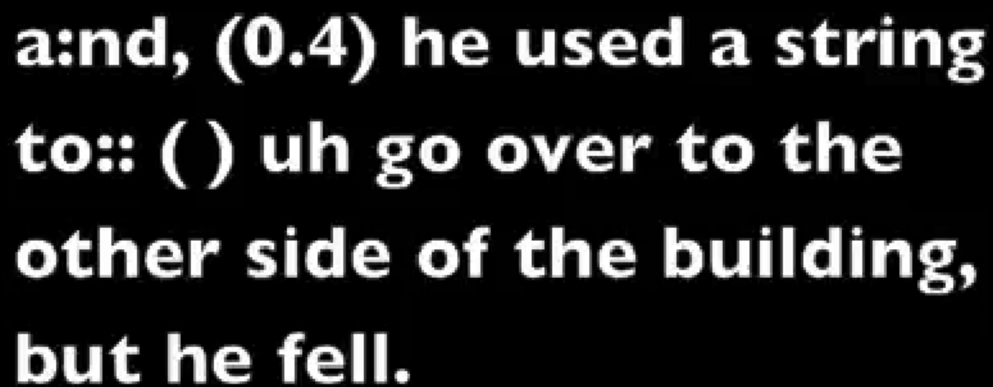
A practice differs from a record of practice in two important ways. One difference is that in practice, participants use a wide variety of semiotic resources to make meaning, while a record of practice inevitably filters out some of the semiotic resources that participants employ. Another difference is that practice is human action in context, while a record of practice limits the kinds of context that can be reproduced and, of course, a record creates a new context as soon as it is attended to.

## Practice is multimodal

Let's take these differences one at a time. First of all, practices are done by people and practices are mediated in many ways. Traditionally, we have focused on how language mediates practice and, thanks to millennia of work in linguistics, we have a nuanced understanding of the grammar of tame, well-ordered, written language and more recently, thanks to work in conversation analysis, we have a good understanding of how language works in talk-in-interaction—an understanding that some people have called "grammar in the wild" (Lee, Mikesell, Joaquin, Mates, & Schumann, 2009). But language is not the only system of signs that people employ. Other semiotic systems are clothing, the positioning of our bodies in space, gaze and facial expressions, and of course gestural movement of the hands and arms. The priority that has been given to language is evident in naming these and other semiotic systems "nonverbal communication." These nonverbal semiotic systems have been identified and studied because they have been recorded and, just as in the case of writing, a particular technology of recording had led us to focus on a single semiotic system. The technology of writing has directed attention to the grammar of text; the technology of sound recording has directed attention to the grammar of talk-in-interaction; and the technology of video recording has directed attention to gaze and gesture. But it is the limitations of the technology that has led us to see these ways of making meaning as distinct semiotic systems. In reality there is only one semiotic system, and it is multimodal.

The multimodality of human interaction becomes clear when we describe the ways in which the two systems interact. In 1979, Chuck Goodwin published a brilliant analysis of one short utterance in a multiparty conversation, showing how participants' gaze and their talk are integral to the construction of a participation framework and how, by simultaneously managing gaze and

talk, participants do work to change their alignment to others in the conversation. Goodwin observed multimodal interaction among native speakers of English, but multimodality is no less prevalent in interactions involving second language learners. In work on the gesture of second language speakers, many studies have shown that when they lack verbal resources, second language speakers call on their gestural resources to compensate. I take an illustration of this point from work in Madison done by Suyeon Kim (2010). In Kim's research, she video-recorded Korean-English bilinguals retelling the story from the 1950 cartoon short directed by Fritz Freleng "Canary Row" starring Tweety Bird and Sylvester. Clip 4 records the audio and a transcription of one Korean participant's talk. This allows us to isolate the English verbal resources that he employs to describe a scene from the movie.




**Clip 4. Verbal resources**

In Clip 4, the stretched vowel in "to::" followed by a filled pause indicates the difficulty that this speaker experiences in using his verbal resources to describe the manner in which Sylvester,

the cat, moves. The speaker solves the problem by employing a high frequency generic word for movement that he knows—"go." I ask you now to listen again to this speaker and make to yourself a gesture to show the manner in which you believe Sylvester goes over to the other side of the building.

Clip 5 is a recording of the speaker's gesture, and now the manner in which he describes Sylvester's movement is clear. Did you gesture the manner of Sylvester's movement in the same way?

**Clip 5. Gestural Resources**

In Clip 6, the speaker's integration of gestural and verbal modalities is clear.

**Clip 6. Multimodal Resources**

According to Kim, Korean has limited linguistic resources to represent manner of movement. The English language, of course, has many manner verbs and "swing" is one of them, but this does not appear to be a verbal resource in the repertoire of this Korean speaker, who selects another semiotic modality and expresses manner of motion in his gesture, resulting in what gesture researchers call "manner fog."

Three frames from "Canary Row" in Figure 5 show the movement that the speaker was trying to reproduce. Sylvester is swinging from one building to another. The second-language speaker expresses movement verbally with "go" and direction of movement verbally with "over to the other side of the building," but he expresses manner of movement with gesture.

**Figure 5. Three frames from “Canary Row” showing Sylvester’s manner of movement**

Besides gesture, there are several other resources that participants employ in a practice. I have described seven of these in Young (2008, 2009) and grouped them under the headings of identity, verbal, and interactional resources.

*Identity resources* are represented in the participation framework of the practice and includes the identities of all participants in an interaction, present or not, official or unofficial, ratified or unratified, and their footing or identities in the interaction. *Verbal resources* include both register and systemic metafunctions. Register includes the features of pronunciation and lexicogrammar that participants frequently employ in a practice; Systemic metafunctions are the ways in which participants construct interpersonal, ideational, and textual meanings in a practice. *Interactional resources* will be familiar from conversation analysis and include: (a) social actions—the selection of verbal and interactional actions in a practice and their sequential organization; (b) turn-taking—how participants select the next speaker and how participants know when to end one turn and when to begin the next; (c) repair—the ways in which participants respond to interactional trouble in a practice; and (d) boundaries—the ways that participants open and close a practice and differentiate a given practice from adjacent talk.

Everything that I have discussed so far is a record, not a practice, and a record of practice inevitably filters out some of the semiotic resources that participants employ. Different recordings privilege different semiotic resources: A written record privileges the grammar of text; a CA transcription privileges the sequential context of action; an audio record privileges the speaker's voice, pronunciation, and timing; and a video record privileges gesture, gaze, dress, and the built environment. What we choose to attend to is to a large extent determined by the technology of recording and, while many researchers recognize that semiosis in the wild (that is, in practice) is multimodal, it is the limitations of the technology that makes us see these ways of making meaning as distinct semiotic systems. In reality there is only one semiotic system, and it is multimodal.

## Practice is inseparable from context

A second way in which practice differs from a record of practice is context. Context is vast and includes the physical, spatial, temporal, historical, social, interactional, institutional, and political frames of practice. It sounds less imposing to say that practice happens somehow, somewhere, at some time, and is produced by somebody for some purpose, and the approach that Practice Theorists take is that human interaction cannot be separated from context. But any recording of practice limits the kinds of context that can be reproduced and, of course, as soon as a recording is attended to, a new context is created. But what *is* context? That is not an easy question to answer because we know far less about context than we know about language, and we agree on even less. Perhaps most people would agree with the distinction that Goodwin and Duranti (1992) made: "The notion of context … involves a fundamental juxtaposition of two entities: (1) a focal event; and (2) a field of action within which that event is embedded" (p. 3).

Practice is something that happens somehow, somewhere, at some time; and practice is done by somebody for some purpose. The dimensions of context can then be described as answers to the questions: What is happening? How is it happening? Where is it happening? When is it happening? Who is doing it? And why are they doing it? The focal event is the answer to the questions *what* and *how*, while the field of action (the context) is the answer to the questions *where*, *when*, *who*, and *why*.

Because context includes so much, if we want to observe practice, how much context should we pay attention to and how much should we assume that we know? The answer to this question is quite clearly stated in one tradition. I quote from Anita Pomerantz and B. J. Fehr (1997):

> Conduct is produced and understood as responsive to the immediate, local contingencies of interaction. What an interactant contributes is shaped by what was just said or done and is understood in relation to the prior. […] Rather than treating the identities of the participants, the place, the occasion, etc., as givens, conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists recognize that there are multiple ways to identify parties, the occasion, etc. and that the identifications must be shown to be relevant to the participants. (p. 69)

In the tradition and analytical methods of Conversation Analysis, participants in talk-in-interaction shape their contribution by reference to the sequential environment of the interaction in which it occurs and, at the same time, their contribution renews the sequential environment. For CA, context is continually evolving but it is limited to the sequential environment of utterances, and does not include what lies beyond the temporal and spatial horizon of the immediate occasion of interaction. To be sure, participants in talk-in-interaction may orient to an external social context, but it is only to the extent that they do so that external context is considered to influence their social action. This approach to context derives from the radical

empiricism of Conversation Analysis and the analytical principle that the analyst must only consider the *how* and *what* of interaction, and the *what* is a recording—an audiotape, a videotape, or a transcription. This approach to context was criticized by Cicourel (1992) and others because it appears that so much of an analyst's interpretation of what happens in interaction depends on the analyst and the participants sharing a common cultural (in other words *contextual*) background. The work of a conversation analyst who, alone or with others in a data session, is searching within a recording for an understanding of human interaction, this analyst's work is in fact a discursive practice in a social context—a context that is far removed from the context of the interaction that is being studied.

As soon as researchers move outside a cultural context with which they are familiar, it is necessary to do the kind of ethnographic work that Cicourel advocated in order to understand participants' conduct in interaction. Therefore Conversation Analysis, as I have described it, is not a study of practice, it is a study of records.

## Where?

Paying serious attention to context means attending to the *where*, *when*, *who*, and *why* of practice. *Where?* means the physical and spatial environment, but in social interaction what matters is how participants interpret the environment and how the physical environment instantiates processes that occur beyond the immediate horizon of the interaction. An example of the *where* of practice is a family dinner table and the seating positions around it. Erickson (1992, 2004) analyzed a conversation among the Pastore's, an Italian-American family, who were seated at dinner around a rectangular table. Figure 6 shows how they were seated.

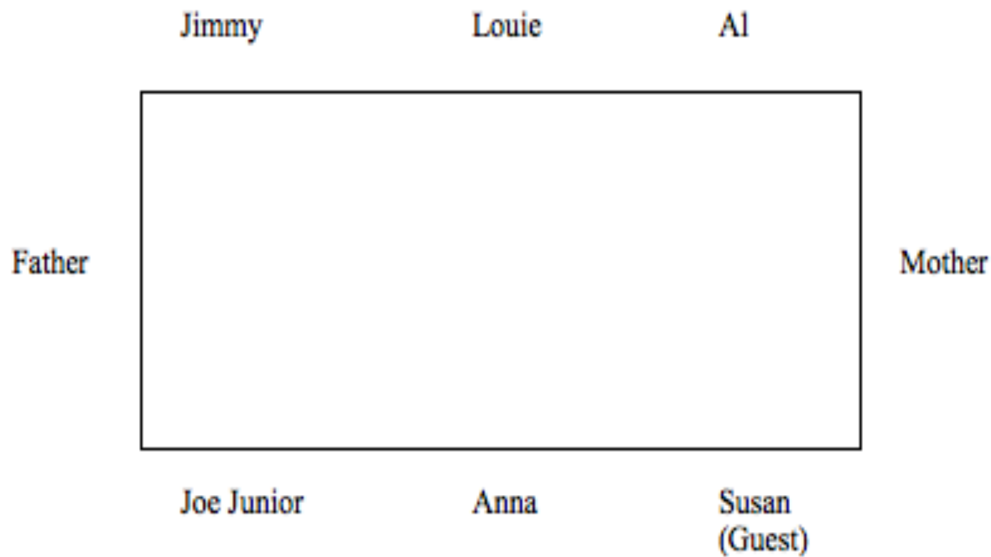



**Figure 6. Seating positions around the Pastores' dinner table**

Where the members of the family are seated both reflects and constructs their status in the family. Father is at one end, mother at the other; Joe Junior, an 8th grader and the eldest son is seated to the right of his father; Jimmy, the youngest son, is in 1st grade and is seated on his father's left. His two brothers, Al and Louie are in the late grades of elementary school, and they are seated on the father's left and toward their mother's end of the table. The only daughter, Anna, who is in 3rd grade, is seated next to the female guest, who is seated next to the mother. "Placement" or seating position at a dinner table is very important in the Diplomatic Service and no less so for the Pastore's, where placement of family members constructs their age, gender, and family identities.

Although positioning in physical space creates and reflects social order, in certain communities of practice, where you are is not as important as who you are with and what you are doing together. Marycliena Morgan (2004) found an illustration of this at the beginning of the music video "Le Bien, Le Mal—The Good, The Bad" by the French hip hop artist MC Solaar

and the American hip hop artist Guru. The first few seconds of the video are reproduced here in Clip 7.

Clip 7. 'Le Bien - Le Mal' by MC Solaar and Guru

The American artist, Guru, is in New York. After hearing taking a phone call from MC Solaar in Paris, Guru descends into the New York subway. When he climbs out of *le Métro*, he is in Paris. The image here is that New York, Paris—it does not matter where you are as long as you are rappin.

## When?

Attending to the *when* of practice means recognizing the temporal conditions, not only when practice happens but also the personal history of participants and the history of the practice itself. Participants' personal histories are relevant to practice because they are predisposed to act and to talk in certain ways in particular situations—a predisposition that Bourdieu (1977) called *habitus*. Habitus means participants' socially acquired predispositions, tendencies, propensities, or inclinations. Habitus is indexed by mental phenomena such as opinions and outlooks, linguistic phenomena such as ways of talking, and physical phenomena such as ways of standing, walking, sitting, and fashions of dress. The linguistic indexes of habitus are national, regional, and social accent—where you grew up and the people that you hung out with all influence how you speak in a particular conversation. These features of personal history allow other people to categorize you as belonging to a larger group of people who share your geographical, class, and ethnic background. In Bourdieu's terms, accent and language choice are habitus, and habitus is something that does not generally reach conscious awareness and, unless it does, it limits the ways in which we can act and talk. In other words, habitus is temporal context; it is an index of personal history that every speaker brings to spoken interaction and that every writer brings to literacy practices.

Practices have histories, too. Cultural and linguistic schemata govern our actions so that we perceive experience through categories of language and culture that are already established. The histories of practices are subsumed in genre, which serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and interpretation of discourse. When an utterance is assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is produced and interpreted is mediated by its intertextual relationship with prior events.

The intertextuality of genre links generic speech to historically prior events, and the social value of generic speech may be enhanced by its links to tradition. In any practice, participants are free to act generically or to attempt to liberate themselves from generic constraints, but the degree to which the formal features of genres are fixed or variable is related to the degree to which they serve an established an accepted authority. As Richard Bauman (2000) wrote:

> Prescriptive insistence on strict generic regimentation works conservatively in the service of established authority and order, while the impulse toward the widening of intertextual gaps and generic innovation is more conducive to the exercise of creativity, resistance to hegemonic order, and openness and change. (p. 87)

Bauman indicated that even the features of context that seem concrete—like physical, spatial, and temporal context—are related to politics, institution, and history. And it is the political, institutional, and historical aspects of context, in particular how those features influence the practice of language learning and teaching to which I want to dedicate the reminder of this essay.

## Pedagogical practice

The practice of teaching happens in an institutional context, and one of the central things that students learn at school is how to construct, reproduce, and resist institutional context. Sometimes, in a classroom when we think we are teaching language, what students are learning is how to manage the institutional context, how to maintain their own identities and their power relations with others and with institutional power. And teachers are doing the same. In other words, students are not learning language; they are learning a classroom practice. Joan Kelly Hall (2004) has an example of how classroom practice triumphs over language learning in her

essay "'Practicing speaking' in Spanish." Here is a record of one classroom conversation that Hall observed. The teacher is pointing to an image projected over her head from a transparency.

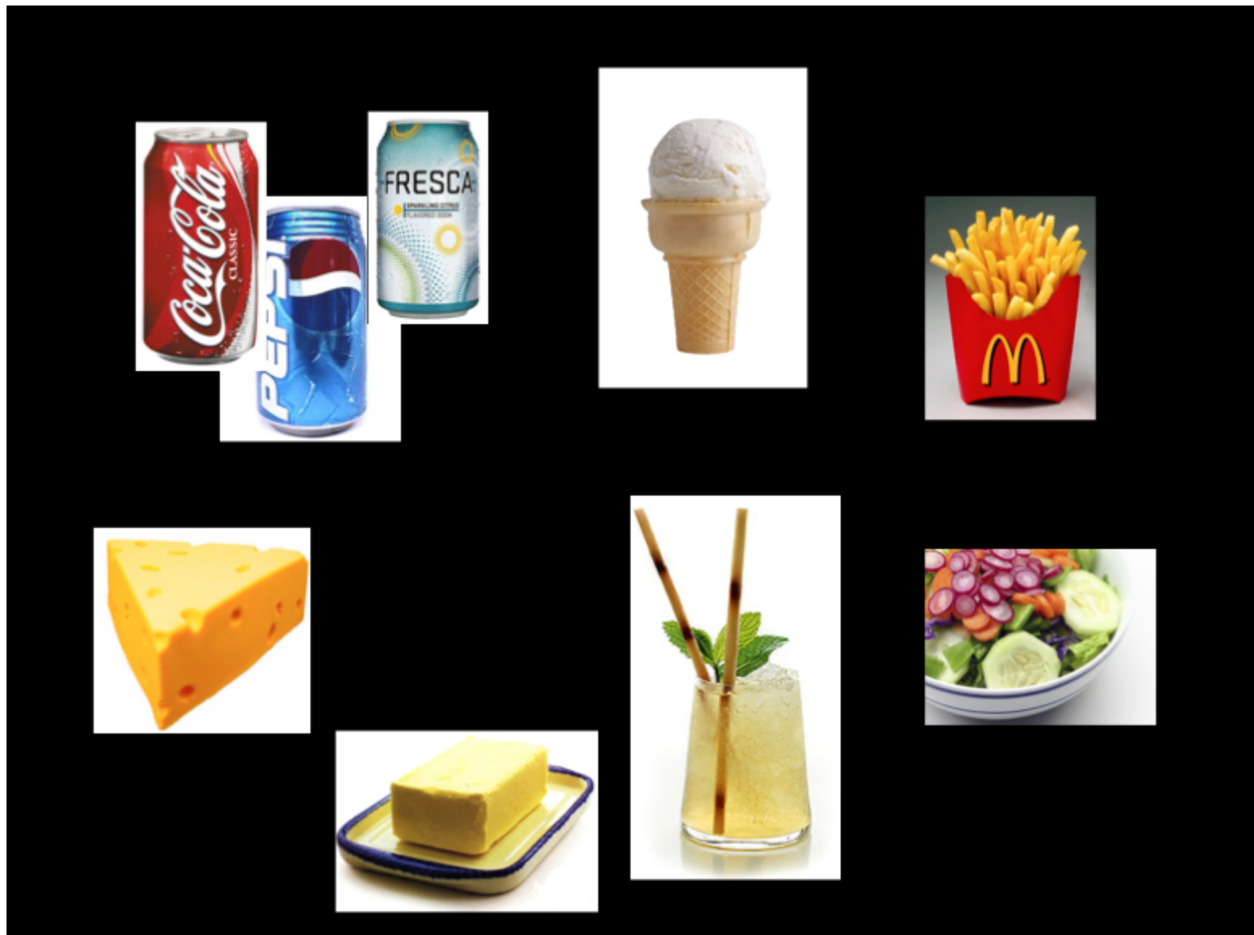



**Figure 7. Food items displayed by the teacher in "Practicing Speaking"**

The image is of various food items, and the teacher is asking the class in Spanish to give the Spanish names for the foods. Here is Hall's transcription of what could be heard in the classroom talk.

T: Ok aquí tenemos Coca Cola tenemos Pepsi Cola tenemos Fresca cómo se llaman
*(Ok. Here we have Coca Cola. We have Pepsi Cola. We have Fresca. What are they called?)*

S1: Budweiser

T: Refresco refresco sí se llaman refrescos sí y aquí hay refresco. Rápidamente qué es esto

*(Soft drink soft drink, yes they're called soft drinks. Yes, and here there is a soft drink. Quickly, what is this?)*

S2: O::u

S1: Uhum ice cream.

T: Helado muy bien señor el helado

*(Ice cream, very good, Sir. Ice cream.)*

S1: Helado

*(Ice cream.)*

T: Clase qué es esto aquí

*(Class, what is this here?)*

S3: Papas fritas

*(French fries.)*

T: *Papas fritas muy bien señorita aquí clase*

*(French fries. Very good, Miss. Here, class.)*

S4: *Kweso*

T: Muy bien queso queso hay queso aquí

*(Very good. Cheese, cheese. There is cheese here.)*

S3: Mantequilla

*(Butter)*

S2: Uh mantequilla

*(Butter)*

T: Mantequilla mantequilla aquí

*(Butter, butter here.)*

Ss: ( )

T: Limonada limonada muy bien limonada sí los refrescos son ( ) la limonada yo no considero limonada refresco no sé sí no yo no sé para mí ( ) [ok limonada. por favor

*(Lemonade lemonade. Very good. Lemonade. Yes, soft drinks are lemonade. I don't consider lemonade a soft drink. I don't know. Yes. I don't know. For me, it isn't for me [ok lemonade please*

Ss: [( )

T: Clase qué es esto

*(Class, what is this?)*

Ss: Ensalada

*(Salad)*

As with any audio or video record, the transcription you see is limited to the activities and talk that the technology of audio recording is able to capture, but much more was going on. Hall

was present as an observer in the class while the recording was in process, and she was able to observe much more about the classroom practice she called "Practicing Speaking." While the teacher and students were conducting the public business of the class, Hall observed a considerable amount of subordinated communication among a subset of ratified participants—what Goffman (1981) called "byplay." This was not part of the official instructional discourse and was not recorded by camera or microphone. Hall described the students' byplay as follows.

> As the teacher talked to the large group, the students often interacted with their nearby seat mates. While there was occasional use of Spanish in these whispered side sequences, English was the predominant code. As long as the students interacted with each other quietly, and were not major distractions to the larger official instructional discourse, the teacher did not prevent them from doing so. Thus, there was usually a steady hum of background talk among the students throughout each class meeting. (p. 74)

The institutional name of the class that Hall observed was a first-year high school Spanish class. But what were the students learning? They did not seem to be learning the skills necessary to participate in a Spanish-speaking community outside the classroom because only the simplest conversational skills were required to participate in "Practicing Speaking." All they had to do was to list, label, and recall Spanish words or simply wait for other students to do so. They did not have to monitor unfolding talk in order to detect or correct possible misunderstandings and, since most of the practice involved listening to the teacher, students could participate as much or as little as they wished. Instead, what students learned in "Practicing Speaking" was how to participate in the activities required of the teacher and to maintain their byplay at a level that did not result in unruly behavior that could have affected their grade in the class. Hall concluded:

> As long as the students did not get out of hand and overtly threaten the teacher's authority, they were allowed to create fairly comfortable spaces in their neck of the classroom, talking to neighbors, catching up on work for other classes, daydreaming, and in other ways living quietly along the border … (p. 84)

Hall's example of "'Practicing Speaking' in Spanish" contrasts learning language with learning practice. As classroom researchers, we might focus on the record of public discourse, but the technology of our recording makes us oblivious to the discursive practice: the recurrent goal-driven activity in which participants co-construct identities—a practice in which the teacher and her students create, reproduce, and resist the values and powers of the school as institution and of the society beyond the school walls. "Practicing Speaking" is, however, a pedagogical practice and bears only superficial resemblance to practices that second language learners may meet in the community outside the walls of the institution. What similarities there are reside only in the language—the Spanish vocabulary and grammar—but Hall suggests that what the students learn is not the language but the practice.

## Concept-based instruction

Recognizing the difference between institutional pedagogical practice and practice in the community is just a beginning. Why can't practices in a community where the second language is spoken be reproduced in an institutional setting? Why not just role-play a community practice in the classroom? The reason is that because the contexts are different the practices are different. So what is to be done? Hall proposed, and I agree, that students should study practices in a community of practice outside the classroom, either *in situ* or through video recordings of authentic community practices. She wrote:

> By standing outside of interactive practices that are of significance to the group(s) whose language is being learned, and analyzing the conventional ways that verbal resources get used, the movement that occurs between their conventional meanings and their individual uses, and the consequences that are engendered by the various uses, we can develop a far greater understanding both of ourselves and of those in whose practices we aspire to become participants. (p. 144)

There is considerable support for Hall's call for learners' conscious and systematic study of practice in the pedagogical theory of the Soviet psychologists P.Y. Gal'perin (1974/1989) and V.V. Davydov (1988). Concept-based instruction was developed within Vygotsky's theory of the cultural mediation of cognition. Extending Vygotsky's ideas to the teaching-learning process, Gal'perin and Davydov recognized that the quality of the cultural tools of instruction—in other words, the teaching materials and the way they are organized in a curriculum—mediate a learner's cognitive development. Concept-based instruction is then a framework for a curriculum based on the meditational value of the cultural tools of instruction.

Concept-based instruction is the provision of efficient cultural-historical tools to learners so that they may solve problems in a specific domain. The most efficient tool for learners is the provision of a general procedure that learners can use to solve any specific problem in a given instructional domain. The initial step in the procedure is the construction of a theory of the domain of instruction—in this case a theory of practice, a theory that recognizes multimodal meaning-making and socio-cultural context. The second step is to use this theory in conceptualizations that relate participants' semiotic choices in a given practice to the contextual dimensions of the practice. These conceptualizations were called by Gal'perin "schemata for complete orienting basis of action" or SCOBA. They are not necessarily verbal but they are intended to help learners connect their knowledge of theory to a concrete and goal-directed

action that is guided by their theoretical knowledge. The third step is to encourage learners' verbalizations, which mediate their internalization of the material representations represented nonverbally in Step 2. Verbal activities can be individual private speech or group social speech.

## ITA office-hour directives

Several applications of concept-based learning to the development of curricula for adult second language education have been described by Lantolf and his colleagues, and I will use one of these as an illustration of a concept-based instructional program in discursive practice. Steve Thorne, Jon Reinhardt, and Paula Golombek (2008) designed a curriculum to help international teaching assistants at an American university develop interactional skills in office hours. The practice that they intended to teach was office-hour interaction between an ITA and an undergraduate student, and in their published report they focused on how ITAs give directions to students. The first step in their curriculum was to introduce ITAs to a theory of practice. An example of such a theory would include, first, a theory of context, which would be introduced to learners by means of the questions presented previously: What is happening? How is it happening? Where is it happening? When is it happening? Who is doing it? And why are they doing it? Within each context, a practice is constructed by participants employing the identity, verbal, nonverbal, and interactional resources that I described earlier.

Participants employ these resources in a particular configuration related to their perceptions of social and cultural context and, by doing so, they construct a practice. In Thorne et al.'s curriculum for ITA training, they provided the learners with written records of practices that they obtained from two different academic corpora. The public domain Michigan corpus of academic spoken English, or MICASE, is a set of written transcripts of various academic interactions

including office-hour interactions (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002). Thorne et al. used MICASE as a baseline of expert office hours for a comparison with transcripts from a corpus of learner office hours, which Reinhardt (2007) had collected, called ITACorp.

For the first part of their program, ITAs in training engage in discussion and activities that center on the relation between context and the resources that participants employ in order to construct, reproduce, or resist a particular practice. They are then exposed to transcriptions of office hours from the MICASE and ITACorp corpora such as the following MICASE transcript from an office hour in anthropology.

> T: um, okay that's good, okay here you go ... okay this is a very awkward sentence. <LAUGH>
>
> S: yeah it is <SS: LAUGH>
>
> T: right. okay, I um ... okay I want you to ... well maybe I should see how you, do this … okay. um … it seems to me like in this paragraph there are lots of totally different things going on. um, and in general you should do this throughout the paper too. you need to go through and ask yourself what the point of each paragraph is, right? um and make sure it has a point, and make sure it says what its point is, okay? um, cuz here we've got, okay. the first sentence which is to me a really important point that you should talk more about, right?

Thorne et al. used this transcript to introduce the use of directives in ITA office hours, which they did, first, by asking learners four basic questions about the transcript.

1. Who are the participants? What do you think their relationship is?
2. Where do you think the session could be taking place?
3. What is the teacher trying to get the student to do?

4. What language does the teacher use to accomplish this?

In the next step of Thorne et al.'s concept-based curriculum, they followed Gal'perin's suggestion to provide a materialization that represents connections between the contextual features of the practice and the verbal resources that participants employ to construct it. The schema for complete orienting basis of action or SCOBA that Thorne et al. developed is represented in Figure 8 to show visually the relationship between context in an office hour and an ITA's choice of pronoun to direct a student's action.

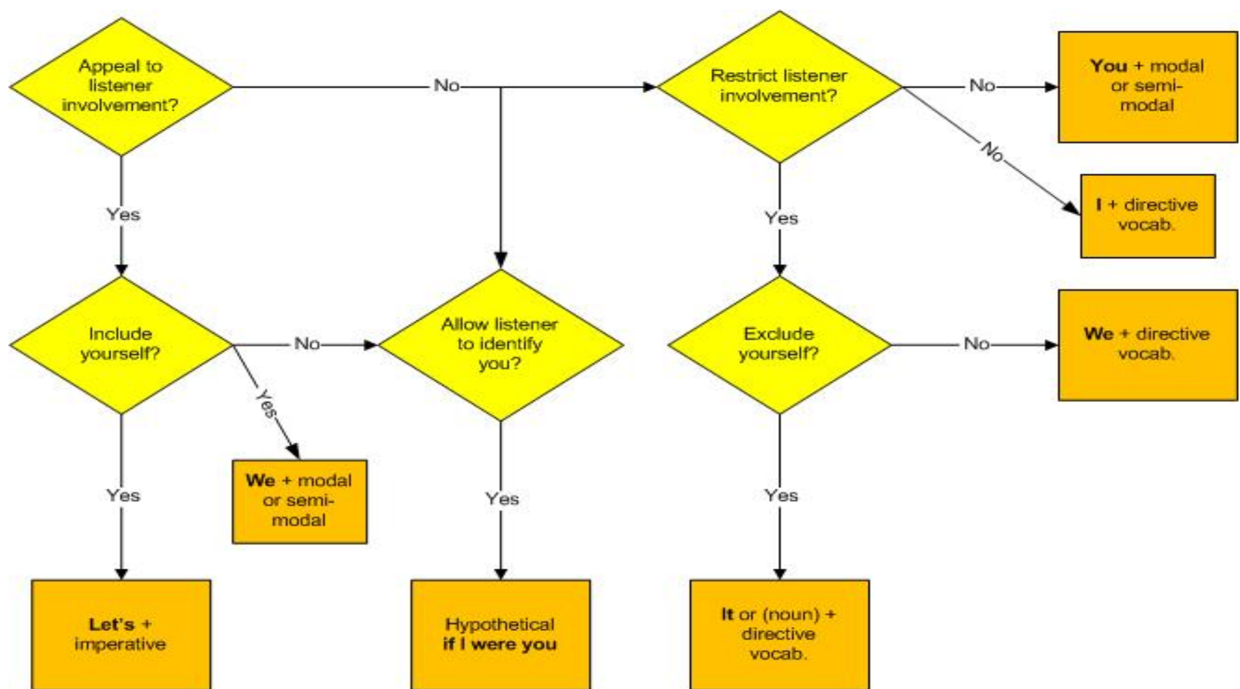



**Figure 8. SCOBA of pronoun choice in ITA office-hour directives. From Thorne et al. (2008)**

The ITAs used this materialization individually to mediate cognitive connections between context and language form, which they then discussed verbally among themselves. The final phase of the concept-based curriculum is an explicit comparison, which the trainers provide, of

pronoun use in directives by ITAs in the MICASE expert corpus and in the ITACorp learner corpus. Thorne et al. provide this in Table 1. ITA trainees are then asked to discuss and offer their explanations of the data in the table.

**Table 1. Comparison of pronoun use in directives by ITAs in the MICASE corpus and the ITACorp corpora. From Thorne et al. (2008)**

| Directive construction word/phrase | ITA Learner corpus | Rate per 10k | MICASE Expert corpus | Rate per 10k | Ratio of over/ underuse |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *I suggest* OR *my suggestion* | 30 | 3.35 | 5 | 0.28 | 12.0314 |
| *You should* | 94 | 10.50 | 83 | 4.63 | 2.2710 |
| *Let's* | 41 | 4.58 | 118 | 6.58 | 0.6967 |
| *We* | 146 | 16.31 | 881 | 49.1 | 0.3308 |
| *I would* | 0 | 0.00 | 64 | 3.57 | – |
| Total words | 89,489 | | 179,446 | | |

I have spent some time retelling Thorne, Reinhardt, and Golombek's development of a curriculum for language learning based on Gal'perin's and Davydov's principles of concept-based instruction. I have done so because it seems to me that concept-based instruction is a way in which insights from Practice Theory can be applied in second language learning and teaching. Not all features of Practice Theory as I have presented it are shown in Thorne et al.'s curriculum. For instance, the records Thorne et al. used to illustrate ITA office hours are written transcriptions and, for this reason, their curriculum is language-centered and does not include other semiotic modalities. But their curriculum does encourage learners to consider the *who*,

*where*, *when*, *how*, and *why* of context, and it is up to the learners to establish how much of the institutional and political context of a university office hour they wish to consider.

The advantage that I see of a concept-based approach to instruction is that a conceptual analysis of a specific practice encourages portability of the same concepts to other practices within the domain of academic discourse. In marked contrast, in bottom-up or inductive learning, learners are required to infer general principles from multiple examples and they must identify a new exemplar as similar to ones that they have already met. In contrast, a top-down concept-based encourages learners to develop a concept, or theory, of the domain of instruction. This concept can then mediate their understanding of other practices within the same domain. In other words, the ITAs experiencing Thorne et al.'s concept-based curriculum learn not only directives in university office hours but can also apply their theoretical knowledge to other practices in other interactional practices at American universities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have tried to make the case that in applied linguistics we are too language centered. We need to remove the blinkers that recording technology has placed upon us so we can recognize the multimodality of human interaction. And we need to do much more work to understand the context of practice, to develop our understanding so that it can stand level with

our understanding of language. Like a journey on the subway of the real world, Practice Theory has taken us to an understanding of practice as performance, as action in the living world, in the immediate here and now, as inseparable from context. An interesting journey still awaits us. I hope that you will take a ride.[2]

## Notes

1 Video clips are taken from a promotional video for the iPhone app *Exit Strategy NYC* http://www.exitstrategynyc.com/. The full promotional video is available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Miu2mojXI0M.

2 “Subway Hand” by Charles Addams

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