

## Book review

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**Richard F. Young**, 2009: *Discursive practice in language learning and teaching*.

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**Richard F. Young**, 2009: *Discursive practice in language learning and teaching*.

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What counts as second language (L2) knowledge, how it is learned, and how what is known about L2 learning informs teaching have been conceptualized in different ways by L2 researchers from different epistemological and ontological perspectives. Within a broadly social perspective, while there is recognition that L2 learning and teaching take place in social context, how social context should be conceptualized and what weight it may bear on learning and teaching are a matter of contention. Indeed, there has long been a division between the micro and macro views among researchers, with the micro view privileging the agency of learners at the level of local interaction (e.g. studies in the ethnomethodology and conversation analysis tradition), while the macro view attaches great importance to the constraints that social structure has on the learning process (e.g. studies informed by critical theory).

Richard Young's monograph, *Discursive practice in language learning and teaching* (published in the two versions listed above), is an important and timely contribution in that it proposes Discursive Practice (DP) as a theoretical framework to transcend just such a division. Practice here is defined as 'the construction and reflection of social realities through actions that invoke identity, ideology, belief, and power' (p.1; page numbers relate to the first of the two references above), and DP is a practice that involves language, among other semiotic resources. These definitions suggest that L2 learning is a social action, discursively constructed as L2 learners participate in social interactions that involve the negotiation of meaning, identity, and power relations. Such a view of L2 learning takes into consideration both interaction at the micro level and social influence at the macro level.

The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 defines DP and gives an outline of the book, while Chapter 2 provides a rich account of the historical development of language-in-context, the foundations for DP. Chapters 3–4 examine the relationship between language and context and lay out the analytical framework for DP. In Chapter 3, with

examples drawn from L2 research literature, Young vividly demonstrates that contexts, as conceptualized by L2 researchers, have different layers of meaning and thickness, which in turn exert differential impact on language-in-interaction and language learning. Chapter 4 elaborates on a set of analytic tools provided by participation framework, systemic functional grammar, and conversation analysis that can be used to analyse the verbal, interactional, and nonverbal resources deployed by participants in practices.

Chapters 5–6, the core of the book, explore how L2 learning, teaching, and testing can be understood in a new light within the framework of DP. Drawing on language socialization and situated learning, and following Miller and Goodnow (1995), Young argues that the unit of analysis in DP is ‘person-participating-in-a-practice.’ Such a view of learning takes practice to be the connection between the individual and society and places practice rather than language at center stage. Consequently, what is learned is not so much the language per se, but how to participate in a practice; and thus learning means changing in participation over time. To illustrate, Young cites a few studies that he terms ‘documents of learning’. One of these studies shows how the participation status of an ESL student in a discursive practice called revision talk changed as he became more attentive to, and skillful at, turn-taking management and the use of nonverbal resources at writing conferences with his tutor over a period of four weeks (Young & Miller, 2004). Conceptualizing L2 learning as participating in practice has two important implications for L2 teaching and testing. First, rather than focusing on language alone, the participation framework, verbal, interactional and nonverbal resources deployed by participants in practices in L2 communities should be systematically studied, taught, and made the goals of testing. Second, since practice serves as the pivot between the individual and society, the picture of L2 teaching and testing is not complete without considering the larger social and political factors. In the final chapter, Young brings the book to a close by revisiting the relationship between language and context and calling for more research in DP.

The book is compellingly cross-disciplinary and ambitious in its scope, drawing on theories from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy to explicate the relationship between language and context. Throughout the book, Young also makes frequent reference to theories and studies in L2 research that are deemed relevant to and compatible with DP, including Young’s own lengthy contributions to this line of research. Through novel synthesis and careful argument, these theories and studies are woven into a whole to make the case for DP as an approach that accounts for both language-in-interaction and the social dimension of L2 learning and teaching. In Chapters 5–6, for example, Young draws on language socialization, situated learning, concept-based language teaching, L2 pragmatics, critical pedagogy, critical language testing, and other theories to theorize learning, teaching, and testing as involving not only face-to-face interactions, but also identity construction and power relations. All readers will benefit from such a broad overview of the literature and appreciate the connections that are made between different theoretical perspectives.

Another important contribution of the book is that it invites critical reflection on language teaching and testing. Young points out that L2 teaching has a long history of privileging language to the detriment of practice, resulting in pedagogical practices that bear little resemblance to the practices of various L2 communities outside the classroom. A shift

away from language to a focus on practice means that L2 teachers are faced with the dual tasks of drawing learners' attention to local interactional resources, such as the sequential organization, turn-taking dynamism, embodied actions, and alignment that participants display to one another in interaction, and at the same time bringing to learners' conscious attention the ideological nature of language learning. In testing, a focus on practice necessarily prompts test designers to consider more seriously contextual factors in testing practices. As the interactional, nonverbal resources and the social and political dimension of language teaching and testing have not been accorded much attention in classroom pedagogy and testing practices, Young's call to look beyond language is fully justified. L2 teachers, researchers, teacher educators, test designers, examiners, and policy-makers will find much food for thought in Young's arguments.

Given that the aim of Young's book is to address the contentious division between the micro and macro views of L2 learning and teaching and to advocate a practice approach – and in the spirit of furthering the debate – I will raise a few critical points in what follows. As noted earlier, Young develops his DP framework by carefully synthesizing different theoretical perspectives and critically reviewing a large number of relevant studies that seem to emphasize a common theme: language-in-interaction and context. However, despite the common theme, the treatment of language-in-interaction and context varies a great deal across studies that are informed by different theoretical perspectives. Tension between a fine-grained analysis of interaction and a rich description of context is clearly visible in this book. For example, while the analytical framework in Chapter 4 is geared toward a fine-grained analysis of talk-in-interaction, most of the context-rich studies reviewed in Chapter 3 only offer a cursory treatment of talk. This disjuncture may leave readers wondering how the micro-analytic tools can be reconciled with context-rich descriptions. Young himself recognizes this conundrum in the final chapter, pointing out the need for future research to 'trace the connections between language and context more clearly' (p.231). Future researchers can perhaps take up this challenge.

Another point that I would like to raise concerns how discursive practices can be taught. Following Hall (2004), Young suggests that 'students should study practices in a community of practice outside the classroom, either in situ or through video recordings of authentic community practices' (p.199). Although Young does not make it explicit, I assume that the study of video recordings takes place in some instructional context such as the classroom. The concern here is that a discursive practice of an L2 community, even preserved in the form of video recordings, is necessarily divorced from its original context of use once it is introduced into the classroom, thus losing its 'authenticity' (if there is such a thing in the first place; see Widdowson, 1998). Therefore, the DP approach, while broadening the scope and content of what should be taught and learned, has to come to terms, just like other approaches, with the irreconcilability between pedagogical practices and discursive practices outside the classroom. Much can be gained if a DP approach can turn its critical gaze on pedagogical practices in the classroom with a view to improving them, so that L2 community practices can be learned with maximum efficiency and effectiveness in instructional contexts.

The above reservations notwithstanding, Young should be applauded for proposing a promising theoretical framework and setting a new and ambitious agenda for future researchers. As Lourdes Ortega rightly points out in her foreword, Young's book 'expands

the intellectual landscape of SLA' (p. viii). As such, it should appeal to all professionals who are interested in a social perspective in general, and a DP perspective in particular, on L2 learning and teaching.

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