

Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching

Richard F. Young.

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Over the last few decades, growing research attention has been devoted to the key role of social context in second language learning and within the field of second language acquisition (SLA). This attention is clearly documented in this volume. In *Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching* the author, Richard F. Young, proposes a framework of Discursive Practice in which language learning is seen as an essentially social phenomenon. Young is interested in highlighting the usefulness that such a proposed framework may have for learning, teaching and testing languages across different contexts. With this goal in mind, the author presents an outstanding volume which opens new avenues in the study of the connecting lines that exist between language and the socio-cultural contexts in which people use language in face-to-face interactions.

The book is made up of seven chapters as well as a foreword by the series editor, an appendix with the transcription conventions used throughout the volume, an extensive reference section, and a combined author and subject index. On the whole, Young's arguments are articulate and well supported with multiple samples of discourse data that clearly show the particular connections between certain features of context and participants' use of language. Likewise, the book is complemented with several useful tables and figures, which help readers visualize not only results from the empirical studies being reviewed but also schematic representations of important concepts being defined.

After first presenting a clear definition of the terms included in the title, namely "practice", "discursive", "language learning" and "language teaching", Chapter 1 outlines the organization of the volume by briefly describing the content of each of the remaining chapters. In chapter 2, "Foundations for the study of practice", the historical roots that have contributed to the development of Practice Theory are presented. Those roots are based on the work done over the last 50 years by semioticians, such

as Saussure and Peirce, by philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle, by linguistic anthropologists such as Malinowski, J. R. Firth, Hymes and Levinson, and by sociologists and ethnographers, including Bourdieu and Sahlins. Drawing on the work done by these scholars, Young provides a rationale for considering talk-in-interaction as discursive practice. In his own words, “ignoring the context of talk cannot lead to an understanding of its function ... [since] ... all talk happens somewhere and somewhen and is produced by somebody for some purpose” (page 46).

Chapter 3, “Investigating context”, is grounded on the fact that talk and its context are inseparable. In order to analyze context, Young relies on the famous five (“Where?” “How?” “When?” “Who?” “Why?”) questions that need to be asked about every utterance to make it into a discursive practice. Then, four approaches that have been developed to explain the relationship between talk and context are reviewed by presenting recent work conducted by a number of researchers. Those approaches involve a triple “applied linguistic perspective”, which pays close attention to the linguistic analysis of sentences in the situational contexts they appear: an “ethnographic perspective”, which describes the physical, social, and institutional context in which language development occurs; an “emotional perspective”, which examines what learners, their teachers, their parents, and their friends report about their language learning experiences; and a “political perspective”, which shows how global social forces and decisions may influence language learning and language use.

Moving from the analysis of context described in the previous chapter, the focus of Chapter 4, “Discursive resources”, is to present the Participation Framework as a frame to analyse the kind of strategies participants employ to achieve their goals in a particular interaction. Those strategies include the verbal, interactional and nonverbal resources, all necessary to create discursive practices. “Verbal resources” are presented as ways of making meaning in context and are analyzed within the Systemic Functional Grammar; “interactional resources” are considered as ways of creating social meanings and identities in interaction and are studied using the approach of Conversational Analysis (CA); and “nonverbal resources” are seen as part of situated practices and are explained by following Goodwin’s extension of the methods employed in CA.

In Chapter 5, “Language learning and discursive practice”, the three questions of “What is learned?”, “Whose learning?” and “Who is

participating in the learning?” are considered as the frame for examining language learning within a discursive approach. Focusing specifically on the first question, Young supports that what is learned is not the language but the practice. That is, according to the theories of Language Socialization and Situated Learning, the process of language learning does not only include the acquisition of knowledge about language but also learners’ ability to adapt their available linguistic and interactional resources to new situations. It is therefore such a process of adaptation to unfamiliar circumstances which favours language learning to take place.

Chapter 6, “Contexts of teaching and testing”, deals with the issue of how the Practice Theory approach can explain the process of language learning in relationship to language teaching and language assessment. Two main ways of approaching the teaching of discursive practices in a given language are described. Whereas the “pedagogy of practice” is exclusively centred on reproducing the internal architecture of a particular practice into a pedagogical exercise, the “critical pedagogy” attempts to highlight the function of such a practice as the link between the individual and the society. Regarding the potential of the practice approach to language testing, Young indicates that current work is being carried out to analyze whether people’s results in a given test can be generalized to their performance in other nontesting contexts.

The concluding chapter, “Prospects for practice”, masterfully outlines areas for further research that examine how the Practice Theory approach presented in the volume can assist in a better understanding of language learning, teaching and testing. Additionally, Young suggests that more work is needed to study the possible applications that such a framework of discursive practice may have to cognitive-psychological theories of language learning.

Overall, this volume is comprehensive, well written and makes a major and much needed contribution to the study of the social context of second language learning. Additionally, it clearly shows the applications that the proposed Discursive Practice approach may have for second language teaching and testing. In this sense, this book is highly recommendable to both researchers and scholars working in the field of SLA as well as teaching professionals and students engaged in teacher-training courses. The volume will, no doubt, be considered as an enriching source of information for understanding current and future studies on context and SLA, as well as a

useful resource to accurately inform decision-making processes in the context of schooling.

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