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Social Context in TBLL&T: (How) Does it Matter?

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Challenge for TBLL&T:

Learner experience matters

Depending on their social, linguistic, and personal circumstances, learners do different things with words (i.e., they do different tasks) with different people in different places at different times... with important consequences for L2 learning.
TBLL&T: Learner experience matters...

... But little has been said about possible conceptualizations of social context and their relative value for TBLL&T.
Task-based research


**Goal**: Connections between *systematicity, variation, and change*, as part of a coherent theory of IL development

**Context (linguistic & social)** as a source for linguistic variation

e.g., Tarone & Parrish (1988), Yule & Macdonald (1990)
Task-based research


Goal: Connections between task communicative demands, variation, and opportunities for learning, as part of a coherent theory of task-based language learning

Task as a substitute for context

e.g., Pica (2005)
Task-based research


**Goal**: Connections between cognitive demands, variation, and opportunities for learning, as part of a coherent theory of task-based language learning

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**Task as cognitive conditioning**

Research on the here-now/there-then; planning & rehearsal; reasoning demands; motivational tasks; working memory... R. Ellis (2003, 2005), Robinson (2001), Skehan (2003), etc.
Criticisms all along

Sociolinguistic caveats:

Caveats raised by the social turn:
Tasks after the social turn

Contingency

Social context
(blurred boundaries)

Task-based
L2 use & learning
(blurred boundaries)

Agency

Variability
Contingency:

Contingent data

Ontology?

Generalization

Particularization

(only options?)

Epistemology?

Inferences

cf. papers in Chahoulb-Deville, Chapelle, & Duff (2006)
Intentionality

Agency

Identity

Consciousness
Goals
Regulation

Power

Dialogue
Resistance
Transformation

Relations with others
Senses of self
Social and cultural worlds
Affiliations / Imagination
Variability

**Complementary**

- Psychological SLA theories:
  - Learner-external variables
  - Learner-internal IDs

**Central**

- Sociocultural theory: Constitutive of human experience & Complexity & DS Theories:
  - Site of development

Random noise

Formal linguistic SLA theories
Complementary

Psychological SLA theories:

- Linguistic environment
- Tasks demands
- IDs, learner-external
- IDs, learner-internal

Only peripherally done in TBLT research so far

Variability

Central

Sociocultural theory:
Constitutive of human experience &
Complexity & DS Theories:
Site of development

Only recently begun as a line of TBLT research
What to do?
Take social context seriously in TBLL&T...
Strategy 1:
Look to theories that offer social re-specifications of our phenomena
Some theories offering social re-spezifications of phenomena:

**L2 grammar:**
Systemic-Functional Linguistics

**L2 interaction:**
Conversation Analysis

**L2 cognition:**
- Vygotskian theory
- Dynamic Systems theory

**L2 learning:**
Language socialization

**L2 self:**
Identity theory
Strategy 2: At a minimum, contextualize
Contextualization = “understanding and documenting the research context”

(Duff, 2006, p. 76)
Contingent data

Ontology?

Inferences

Epistemology?

Continuum of options:

Generalization
[demands well-defined populations, cross-context replication]

Analytic generalization
[generalization to theories, not populations; Duff (2006, after Firestone, 1993)]

Particularization
[understanding singularities the goal]

cf. papers in Chahoulb-Deville, Chapelle, & Duff (2006)
Strategy 3: Investigate diverse contexts & populations
How much TBLL&T research on:

- Second & foreign language contexts
- Varying ages
- Disparate social milieus with varying L2 use needs
- Heritage language contexts
- L1 semiliterate/L1 oral populations of L2 learners
Big changes in findings and theories would accrue just if diverse **contexts & population** were investigated (cf. Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Ortega, 2005; Siegel, 2003; Sridhar, 1994; Valdés, 2005)...
But...
How exactly can social context be theorized (in TBLL&T)?
Theories offer a theoretical continuum that ranges from *externally documented* experience to *lived* experience in physical, inter-personal, social, political, and cultural-historical context.
Social context, external or lived?

**Metaphor**
- container
- resource
- source
- Site of struggle, to be transformed

**Epistemology**
- positivist
- constructivist
- Critical
- pragmatic

**Ontology**
- raw - perceived
- etic - emic
- general – particular
- homogeneous – variable

**Methodology**
- quantitative
- qualitative
- naturalistic
- data
- elicited data
To me, the importance for L2 learning of diverse experiences in TBLL&T resides less in externally documented experience or fixed environmental encounters and more in experience that is lived, made sense of, negotiated, contested, and claimed by learners in their physical, interpersonal, social, cultural, and historical context.

(Ortega, 2006)
How does social context matter in TBLL&T?

- **Context**: Lived, not raw
- **Contextualization**: A must
- **Diverse contexts**: A must
- **Epistemology**: Diverse
- **Methodology**: Range of choices & continua
- **Ethics**: Critical pragmatism

Prioritize: students, teachers, programs

Negotiate: values, social impact, research choices

TBLL&T reclaimed

Education

Research
What we think we’d like to see:

- Tasks as education events
- Reclaiming the discourse of TBLL&T

Martin, Gin, John, & Lourdes
The unbearable ineludibility of the social context

“[Studying L2 learning] is in many ways similar to painting a chameleon. Because the animal’s colors depend on its physical surroundings, any one representation becomes inaccurate as soon as that background changes.”

Adapted from Tucker (1999, pp. 208-209), who found it in Donato (1998), who took it from Hamayan (n.d. given) ... And it could also have been written by Tarone!
Chameleon and books in Kafue National Park, Zambia.


