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Second language acquisition for EAL learners: from philosophical understandings to classroom practices

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With many children in UK schools currently learning English as a second (or, often, as an *additional*) language, the needs of those young learners are becoming a focus for many teachers. We argue that too much attention has been focused on the *why* and *how* of additional language acquisition and insufficient attention paid to *what* is being acquired, and to links between second and first language acquisition. In the light of the reinterpretation offered, it is suggested that some second language practices can be better understood and so lead to innovative and motivating solutions to fit the needs of new-to-English second language learners in the 21st Century classroom.

Keywords: language acquisition; early childhood education; philosophy; Wittgenstein; sociocultural

Introduction

With one in six children in UK schools currently learning English as a second (or, often, as an *additional*) language and an increase of new-to-English (NTE) children entering the educational system (Drummond 2014), teachers are increasingly focusing their concerns on how best to facilitate young learners in acquiring English. Issues facing many teachers include a lack of second language (L2) curriculum guidance, minimal access to innovative L2 teaching strategies, and inaccessible L2 research-based pedagogy. These concerns appear particularly acute as the young L2 learners may not present as one homogenous multilingual group. Some may have additional complex needs, perhaps as a result of prior experiences of traumatic events; some may come from economically disadvantaged families; some may experience a cultural ‘disconnect’ between home and school. Having said all that, it is of course the case that many L2 learners will be highly motivated and high academic achievers.

All NTE children, we believe, can contribute to, and enrich, classroom learning and teaching experiences.

These concerns are not specific to co-ordinators or peripatetic teachers who may have been previously tasked with the management of young additional language learners, as today this responsibility is usually shared by all class teachers. Those teachers (both in training and qualified) may feel unsure of how best to support NTE learners without accessing effective and theoretically underpinned pedagogical techniques that will enable the children NTE to learn English in speedy and effective ways (Drummond 2014). Due to the importance of the initial stage of English second language learning, we focus specifically upon the most effective teaching strategies matched to the capabilities of second language learners aged between two and 12 years of age. The aim of this paper is therefore, through the application of research-based, innovative, and versatile directions of thinking, to offer some insights which can inform the development of innovative and effective teaching strategies to address the needs of young second language learners in educational settings.

A philosophical perspective

Having outlined the practical issues facing teachers regarding additional language acquisition, it might seem strange to take a detour into the world of philosophy. But, with Gilroy (1996, p. 4), we believe that in considering language acquisition (whether that be a first language or an additional language), attention needs to turn to the philosophical issues about *what* it is that is being acquired, and only then to the ‘why’ and ‘how’ it is acquired. It is important to have an understanding of first language acquisition (FLA) if the ‘first language ... forms the foundation for all later language development’ (Clarke, 2009, p. 9).

Some might question why a philosophical perspective is important. After all, it might be suggested, has not Vygotskian theory been applied to try to explain children’s cognitive development, including first and second language learning in the field of language education? And this is true: one of the most prominent names in sociocultural accounts and, in particular, those concerning second language acquisition (SLA) is that of Lev Vygotsky (S Newman, 2018). It is however worth noting, first, that sociocultural theory ‘was not originally intended as a theory of second language acquisition’ (Swain, Kinnear and Steinman, 2011, p. xvi), and there are good grounds for arguing that Vygotsky’s work is best seen as involving an account of first language acquisition (F Newman and Holzman, 2014, p. 109). It is also worth noting that Vygotsky’s theory (as opposed to his observations) has been

subject to robust critique as failing to offer a coherent sociocultural account of meaning (S Newman, 2018, pp. 363-364).

We turn here to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, someone whose name is conspicuous by its absence in the literature on SLA, but whose later philosophy can be viewed as giving an account of meaning, as evidenced by the opening remarks in the *Philosophical investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1967), henceforth *PI*, and in *On certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969), henceforth *OC*.¹ It is in these remarks that Wittgenstein introduces the phrase ‘language-game’ (*PI*, § 7, p. 5e), which is the *starting* point for a description of meaning that can account for FLA, and the diversity of meanings and their shifting nature (*OC*, § 63, p. 10e). Gilroy builds on Wittgenstein’s perspective to argue that any account of FLA needs to:

1. avoid making language’s meaning irreducibly private
2. avoid an appeal to innate knowledge
3. avoid the circularity inherent in using a translational account of first-language acquisition, which gives the infant the very abilities that are supposed to be explained
4. avoid ignoring the non-verbal aspect of language
5. avoid making an account of first-language acquisition contradict whatever account of meaning is accepted
6. be aware of the connections between the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of first-language acquisition. (Gilroy, 1996, p. 152)

As has been argued elsewhere (S Newman, 2018, p. 358), on these grounds, Vygotsky’s theory of meaning (and therefore of FLA) is found wanting. This then brings us to what might be termed Wittgenstein’s descriptive account of meaning (Gilroy, 1996, p. 111), an account that stresses the social context and the conventional nature of language (*PI*, § 65, p. 31e; § 81, p. 38e) where

Meaning is described as being primarily located in ordinary use, this being ... rule-governed ... within the agreements of a particular social context ... As such it is both fixed and relative ... depending upon whether one’s perspective is within or without that particular set of agreements. (Gilroy, 1996, p. 111)

We suggest here that Wittgenstein's account offers a coherent sociocultural account of meaning (S Newman, 2018, pp. 363-364). Given this background as to *what* it is that is being acquired, Wittgenstein's approach brings to the fore some key aspects of *how* we learn our first language, with implications for how we think about learning an additional language, if 'the core issue in SLA' is 'the language acquisition process' (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 32).

Approaches to second language acquisition

With this understanding of what is being acquired, one role of the teacher can be seen as developing in children an understanding of the rules (implicit and explicit) of particular social contexts, 'by means of *examples* and by *practice*', 'by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement', 'and so on' (*PI*, § 208, p. 83e). Such a perspective builds on Gilroy's six points noted previously and gives recognition to the verbal and non-verbal aspects of language for both FLA and SLA; one key difference between FLA and SLA being that in SLA, the learner has already got a grasp of the notion of what it means to follow a rule (Gilroy, 1996, p. 112).

If L2 learners acquire a new language through close observation, intense listening, and by copying the L2 speech patterns, then the class teacher needs to consider several factors which provide a strong foundation for L2 teaching and 'meaning-making'. These can be considered through the perspectives of, for example, learning spaces, learning design, learning activities, and learning objectives.

First, is the teacher providing a well organised classroom in which the L2 learners can calmly observe, copy, and listen? Second, does the classroom provide 'quiet spaces' where L2 learners can attempt and rehearse the new second language without feeling pressured into doing so? Third, can the class-teacher ensure an ongoing peaceful L2 learning and teaching environment, giving opportunities for an emergent additional language learner to 'eavesdrop', 'listen in' and/or listen intensely.

Creating an appropriate learning environment is, however, just one element in good L2 learning and teaching practices. Knowing how L2 learners build understandings of the new language through the medium of collaborative, social learning must feed into the development of appropriate learning design and teaching strategies. Thus, for example, an individualistic pedagogy, which might overlook the value of children's observations of

others, or misunderstands their observing as a merely passive activity, may limit opportunities for emergent learners of an additional language to copy.

Young L2 learners need to be offered the opportunity to share in pre-task collaborative discussions (even as silent participators) prior to attempting to work independently. L2 learners acquire their developing understandings of the new language through social interactions with others: through discussion, drama and role-play, and using multi-media sources, for example. Practical demonstrations can also be useful for L2 learners: supporting words with visual clues and actions. Smiles and other supportive body language (bearing in mind that the meaning of hand gestures and body language varies between cultures) can also offer non-verbal support. And, as mentioned previously, explanation and correction have their role within the various social contexts (*OC*, § 298, p. 38e). These, with the help of appropriate targets and expectations, help to accelerate the pace at which young L2 learners acquire an additional language and learn to navigate the complex linguistic and social landscapes in the classroom and elsewhere. Wittgenstein's sociocultural account of meaning allows us to understand why such strategies are important.

Conclusion

The research based L2 learning and teaching strategies discussed in this article are intended to be assimilated into everyday classroom practice and to be applied (in the main) within a whole class teaching situation. It has been suggested that this approach involves 'giving only very little, if any, explanation and corrective feedback and offering no controlled practice (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 35); that it is 'instruction-free, naturalistic learning occurring at the subconscious level' (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 35), and that it is unlikely to be successful (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 35). However, the approach we are suggesting cannot be so characterised. On the contrary: we suggest that the development of such 'everyday' second language practices, developed with an appreciation of Wittgenstein's insights into *what* is being acquired, can provide innovative and motivating solutions based upon sociocultural research to meet the needs of NTE language learners in the 21st Century classroom.

Note:

1. As is customary, Wittgenstein's works are referred to in-text by giving details of paragraph numbers indicated thus: § with page numbers having the suffix e to indicate translations into English.

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