Repressing Lacan: Relating a Psychology of Meaning to the Discourse of Second Language Education

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ABSTRACT: Grounded in socioculturalist theory, this article further defines the individual psychological responses of students in formal, second language education settings according to Jacque Lacan's theory of language. By placing Lacan's concepts of repression, the signifier, and the signified within outline of the practice of education we are able to approach language learning from a psychological perspective and not just from a purely linguistic stance. While analyzing the theoretical constructs of goal-directed action and the activity setting, this paper supports and builds on the role of language as a tool in the construction of activity and consciousness during negotiation of meaning in light of Lacan's contribution to the understanding of discourse in second language education. Finally, the present work clarifies and applies the Sausseurian constructs of the signifier and the signified as interpreted by Lacan to second language education theory.

RÉSUMÉ: Selon la théorie sur le langage de Jacques Lacan, ce papier, inspiré de la théorie socioculturelle, explique plus amplement les réponses psychologiques de chaque étudiant se trouvant dans un programme officiel d'enseignement linguistique. En plaçant les concepts d'inhibition; c'est-à-dire le signifiant et le signifié, à l'intérieur du cadre de la pratique enseignante, nous sommes alors en mesure d'aborder l'enseignement d'une langue d'un point de vue psychologique et non pas juste d'un point de vue purement linguistique. Avec le concours de Lacan sur la compréhension du discours dans l'enseignement d'une seconde langue, cet article soutient et renforce le rôle du langage en l'identifiant à un outil dans la construction de l'activité et dans la sensibilisation pendant les échanges sur le signifiant. Et cela, tout en analysant les concepts théoriques de l'action qui vise un but et le contexte de l'activité. Enfin, le présent travail explicite et applique les idées Sausseuriennes du signifiant et du signifié,

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comme Lacan l'a décrit dans la théorie de l'enseignement d'une deuxième langue.

Introduction

Stemming from a socioculturalist framework of human development and cognition (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986; Rommetviet, 1979; Volosinov, 1973), this article places central elements of Jacques Lacan's theory of language (Lacan, 1988a, 1993) in the realm of second language education. Although sociocultural theory offers a view of language as a tool (Wertsch, 1986), Lacan's theory helps us to further understand the role of meaning, communication, and speech as it relates to the role of the individual within formal, second language education environments.

There are two avenues that we can take when studying second language education and formal instruction. Initially, we may consider focusing on the influence that formal instruction has on the route of development of the second language (Hatch, 1978; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) or we may decide to study the rate of development of the individual's second language (Krashen, 1981; Fillmore, 1982; Savignon, 1972). The purpose of analyzing Lacan's theory is not to try to shed light on the route (progression) of language learning. Research into this area is well-documented and valuable (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1990; Tarone, 1988), but the focus of the present theoretical framework is best applied to the rate (success) of overall second language learning in formal settings. It is also argued that if instructors are to ground themselves in Lacanian-influenced theory, then he or she needs to adopt the interface perspective of formal language instruction and second language acquisition (Seliger, 1979). From this perspective, pedagogical rules serve as an acquisition facilitator because they focus the learner on the critical aspects of communicating in a second language (Ellis, 1985).

Outlining Lacan's contributions to second language education theory is not without its challenges. Lacan borrows heavily from Sausseurian linguistics (Saussure, 1959) that some believe go against the sociolinguistic nature of language (Holland, 1998). However, this paper argues that if we view Lacan's theory of language as psychologically-oriented rather than linguistically-focused then we can further clarify individual psychological responses during formal language instruction that are couched in the processes of cognitive development and consciousness (Floriani, 1994).

Sociocultural Thought

Central to socioculturalist theory of human understanding and cognitive development is the idea of situated, goal-directed action (Lantolf, 2000) where an individual's mind is interconnected to the society in which he or she lives and exists. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) further define the situated aspect of sociocultural thought by presenting us with the activity setting as being the focal unit of analysis that transcends individuals, and provides a meaningful way to integrate culture, local contexts, and individual function.

Appropriation and Activity Settings

It is within the various activity settings that we participate in throughout our lives that afford us the opportunities to negotiate the meaning of concepts, words, and goals with others, and this assists us in reaching intersubjectivity (Bakhtin, 1984), especially in formal, academic settings. This negotiation of meaning then assists us during process of reaching intersubjectivity (when we understand what the other person is saying and why he or she is believes what each other does). During this process, our ways of thinking and daily approaches to life are challenged. A basic example of this focuses on the concept of *home*. Instructors in language classrooms often ask students to write or talk about their home. It is during this interaction that the meaning of home for each student emerges as either where they live on campus or perhaps where they are from. Intersubjectivity is reached when the instructor realizes the meaning of home given a particular student.

Bakhtin (1981) focused on the role of language within sociocultural thought by presenting the concept of *heteroglossia*; he notes that "prior to this moment of appropriation (intersubjectivity), the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but it exists in others people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own" (pp. 293-294). It is this process of making words our own that allows for cognitive development by interacting within various arenas of thought as we become aware of how to function within and from various activity settings (Forman & Cazden,1985; Vygotsky, 1962). In the language classroom, students often rely on repetition and imitation of phrases and words. Students not only learn how to say words and phrases, but when to say them as well. The concept of heteroglossia can be directly related to the "when" of language use. That

is, students may hear a native speaker or their instructor use a particular phrase or word in a given situation. The students then appropriate the meaning of this word or phrase according to the situation, and, therefore are not just repeating words or phrases.

Language classrooms that operate within a sociocultural framework view language as a tool that allows for cognitive development (Mantero, 2002), and this, in turn, may assist the process of second language acquisition in a formal, instructional setting. The tool's main function under sociocultural thought is to guide and facilitate communication and mental activity, and is primarily externally oriented. However, as will be presented later in the paper, viewing language from a Lacanian stance (while staying true to sociocultural thought) affords us with a unique insight into individual responses and actions in language classrooms that may help us understand the individual psychological processes that assist second language learning.

The Practice of Education and Scaffolding

Wells (1999) adds that a classroom which relies on a sociocultural framework helps to create and sustain a community of inquiry through co-construction of meaning. Wells offers the following concept, the "Practice of Education" (p. 228), as an outline of just how to create a community of inquiry that is based on the premise of intersubjectivity where:

- The activities undertaken are such that, although chosen by the teacher for their cumulative contribution to an understanding of the central theme, they allow for groups of students to make them their own, and progressively to exercise more choice over how they are conducted.
- They involve a combination of action and reflection, and of group work, individual reading and writing, and whole-class discussion.
- Goals are made explicit and the relationship between these goals and operations by means of which they are to be achieved is made the subject of discussion.
- Perhaps most important, there are frequent *opportunities* to express their beliefs and opinions, to calibrate them with those of their peers, and to change them in the light of persuasive argument or of further information.

Wells further supports the above practice of education as a general account of how participation in cultural practices leads to modification

and transformation of the individual human's consciousness and natural functions (p. 17).

If instructors are to allow for students to develop both cognitively and linguistically in a classroom setting while actively engaged in the appropriation of both meaning and language then one has to reach within sociocultural theory and make use of the practice of scaffolding (Johnson, 1995). Vygotsky (1978) explained scaffolding as including the zone of actual development (what an individual can accomplish without assistance) and the zone of proximal development (what an individual can accomplish with assistance). Instructors of second languages need to understand that both the zone of actual development (ZAD) and zone of proximal development (ZPD) are dynamic and may expand or contract according to the activity setting (Brooks et al., 1997; Donato, 1994). It is also important to realize that instructors are being scaffolded during classroom activities as well as the students. This happens during the day-to-day observation and evaluation practices of the second language classroom. In other words, an instructor must be able to match his or her input, lessons, and classroom activity to the students' levels of language proficiency and cognitive development. This may seem like an obvious point to make, but it must be understood that the concept of scaffolding does not necessarily mean bringing students to our understanding, but it entails coming to an understanding of the individual linguistic and cognitive development of the language learner and being able to present opportunities for language learning.

Lacan's Contribution

Language, in Lacanian terms, accentuates what is real for each one of us (Lacan, 1988a, 1988b, 1992, 1993). Communication and discourse allows for individuals to distinguish between what is natural and that which is social. What is natural is that people will see us as particular individuals with global needs and more contextualized, basic rights. And we, as is natural, are held accountable for our actions as people according to these needs ands others' rights.

As people come to understand the social aspects of their existence through discourse with others, individuals become more and more aware of how inseparable the self is from society, and that meaning originates from outside of us. Lacan viewed this interaction as that of decentering the self. In other words, we notice (and perhaps emphasize) how other people see us and our purpose in society. This engages us in searching

for meaning away from the center (the self) because meaning and the sense of self is constructed through language that existed before us in society (Lacan, 1988a). According to Lacan, the ideal of perfect communication is to endure being misunderstood as we negotiate what is real between ourselves and other individuals.

The Signifier and the Signified

Saussure (1959) argued that the sign consists of two interacting concepts: the signifier and the signified. O'Sullivan et al. (1994) explained these as: "The signifier is the physical form of the sign as we perceive it through our senses (the sound of a word or a photograph), and the signified is the user's mental concept of what the sign refers to (p. 288).

Saussure regarded the relationship between signifier and signified as stable (Sarup, 1993). The signifier "tree" brings about the signified (what a person has in mind as a "tree") to form the complete sign. This distinction is purely analytic because signs cannot be realistically, and concretely, divided into signifier and signified (Ricoeur, 1976) anymore than we can split a piece of paper and into front and back.

Lacan accepted the concepts of signifier and signified, but adopted a different stance on their relationship to one another. Where Saussure believed the relationship between the two to be stable and fixed, Lacan insisted that the signifier is autonomous and not specifically linked to the signified (Lacan, 1977). In other words, the signifier represents the subject for another signifier, and the signified (meaning) emerges through communication and discourse.

If meaning develops through interaction and communication, according to Lacanian thought, then we begin to see how a theory of language that is based on this premise fits within the framework of sociocultural understanding. The concept that communication is always mediated through signifiers that represent the subject for another signifier can be rather difficult to understand. Therefore, the signified (meaning) is attached to or obtained throughout the associations that words or images have to one another, and hence, there is no concrete, absolute meaning as a single, solitary word or sign (Muller, 1996).

Meaning, according to Lacan (1988a, 1992, 1993) is the product of understanding metaphor (substituting one signifier for another as in the example "You are my sun.") as well as metonymy (re: associative meanings, as in the utterance from a waiter in a diner about a customer:

(e.g., "The *ham sandwich* wants his check"). Basically, and fundamentally speaking, if we think of our meaning systems as a mental or conceptual dictionary where coming into contact with a signifier (for example, "tire") leads us to another signifier (perhaps, "car"), and maybe even another ("travel"); assists us in a given context through discourse of assigning meaning to words. The above signifiers (tire, car, travel) may have been given their meanings by communicating about weekend plans and the need for a new front tire. Or perhaps, given another context, the conversation could have been about how someone always falls asleep when sitting in a car for long periods of time. Accordingly, then, meaning (the signified) hinges upon discourse in a goal-directed action of a specific activity setting (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Engestrom, 1991).

Repressing Language and Meaning

If we return to the explanations of signifier and signified, where it was determined that the signifier represents another subject for another signifier then it becomes necessary to investigate the notion of repression as proposed by Lacan (1977, 1988b). In repression, one signifier replaces another as the original ("first") signifier which is pushed more and more into the unconscious (Fink, 1995). Repression can be further understood as the process of interacting within the boundaries and rules of meaning given our experiences with society which have placed it into specific contexts (Kristeva, 1980). So, in accordance with this line of thought, repression is the following of rules of language use and meaning in communication with others. As Abraham (1996) notes: Language and language acquisition can impose limitations (subjugations and repression) on an individual that are defined by boundaries (contexts).

As we learn our first language we repress meanings of words and concepts while we interact in society throughout our lives. For example, as children we may believe that "happiness" means being able to play on the swings with our friends. As we grow older our original notion of "happiness" may be repressed and substituted. We may now believe that "happiness" entails sitting by the ocean with our feet in the sand as we talk to our husband or wife over a nice bottle of wine. Given the second situation, on the beach, the husband then may turn to his wife and say "I am happy," and hope that his wife also holds his meaning of happiness to be true (for the moment). In these two different situations there is one

signifier (happiness) and two signified (meanings) of "playing on swings with friends" or "relaxing on the beach with your spouse."

The Discourse of Second Language Education

Earlier, the statement was made that Lacan's theory of language would assist us in better understanding the role and responses of students in the second language classroom. From this vantage point, the role of the instructor will also be commented upon in light of Lacan's contribution to the understanding of language as a tool as proposed by sociocultural theory. It now becomes necessary to focus on the individual psychological responses that students may be undergoing as they learn a second language in a formal setting. First, though, we shall further define the formal language learning environment.

Acquisition and Participation Metaphors

If we are to speak of the individual, psychological responses during second language education then benefits us to further define the process of second language acquisition in a formal, instructional setting. We are often presented with two different views of second language education: instructors may approach the language classroom as framed by acquisition or participation (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfard, 1998). The instruction as an acquisition metaphor is what we have come to know as the traditional classroom where instruction is focused on the various linguistic forms being studied (Sfard, 1998). As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) note, the acquisition metaphor "allows us to see language as a set of rules and facts to be acquired and permits us to discuss learner language in all of its complexity" (p. 155). Whereas the instruction as participation metaphor stems from the process of a person becoming a member of a community that is engaged in various activity settings. The participation metaphor stresses the "contextual engagement" that is needed during language learning (Rogoff, 1990; van Lier, 2000), and, also includes acquiring different ways of communicating and acting according to the arenas and rules of the diverse groups that make up a society.

In order to allow Lacan's ideas of repression and meaning to take hold in a language classroom, then the participation metaphor becomes a useful framework to operate within and from. Interacting within a socioculturally-based participation metaphor allows for second language acquisition to be fostered and approached as cognitively situated (Forman & Cazden, 1985). In other words, language acquisition takes

place as students participate in the discourse of the second language classroom.

Metalanguage

As Fink (1995) notes, Lacan stated that metalanguage or metadiscourse do not exist because "[there is no such thing] that would somehow escape the limitations of discourse for one is always operating within a particular discourse" (p. 137).

This statement is important because it treats discourse as a psychological entity or concept rather than a linguistic product. Even though there may be at least two languages externally present at any point during interaction in a language classroom, there is still only one overall discourse: the discourse of second language education (Donato & Adair-Hauk, 1992). This same interpretation of discourse is reflected in the sociocultural framework outlined before as tool-oriented, goal-directed action.

Within the proposed framework, if a student speaks English while they are learning Spanish and asks "What is this verb?" then this is understood as still forming part of the overall discourse of the second language classroom, and therefore is treated as absent of metalanguage. Realistically, the contemporary language classroom may be acquisition oriented (in light of the acquisition metaphor) or participation oriented (according to the participation metaphor) at different moments. However, the value of adopting the proposed view of discourse as a single entity, without metalanguage, allows us the instructor to frame tasks according to the premises of the interface position of language learning presented earlier (Ellis, 1985).

Expectation and Interpretation

Student-teacher interaction is founded on two basic principles: expectation and interpretation. Instructors plan activities, lessons, and curricula expecting students to perform certain tasks successfully and acquire knowledge associated with these tasks. But, as Halliday (1975, 1978, 1993) notes, in any given educational arena there is the element of interpretation where students have to successfully interpret the expectations of the teacher in order to perform the assigned tasks effectively and appropriately as opportunities for language acquisition are afforded to them.

In the second language classroom, we need to be concerned with not only the interpretation of tasks by our students, but also the interpretation of the words and language that we use during instructional activities. The concept of negotiation of meaning allows us to scaffold the students as they appropriate the meaning of words during language use and production (Nunan, 1987, 1989; Vygostky, 1962). As noted earlier, repression entails operating within the boundaries of linguistic meaning and the discourse of a given situation; in this case, the discourse of second language education.

Recognizing that students are in the process of not just learning a language (linguistically), but they are also repressing their first language meaning systems becomes crucial to the argument presented. Accordingly, the process of students repressing their first language meaning systems as they are scaffolded by the teacher and other students takes place in a classroom that operates within the participation metaphor.

Sensibly, there will be meanings that may be shared between the first language and second language. In these situations, students will be better able to interpret the expectations and goals of the task and the instructor. Lantolf's (2000) notion of becoming familiar with the discourse of participation in second language education allows us to reframe our methodologies when the students have misinterpreted the meaning of a task. As Mantero (2002) explains, this allows educators to refocus the task in question according to the process of language use and goal orientation within a psychologically-oriented discourse rather than only linguistically refocusing the task using teacher-centered, input-based strategies.

Psychological Responses

Lacan supported the idea of the signifier representing the subject for another signifier. He also maintained that meaning (the signified) is not devoid of context (Lacan, 1977). This reflects the difficulty of using language and learning meaning without being presented with a specific, common discourse and arena of social activity. However, a shared, concrete arena is key if communities are to build social and individual knowledge bases from which to operate in and from (Engestrom, 1991). Each one of the following statements represents different psychological responses that focus on the student's perception of discourse during formal language instruction. As presented earlier, it is during this

interaction that a student's first language meaning system becomes repressed according to the other signifier or subject during goal-directed action.

In the statements that follow,

- "the teacher" represents the traditional understanding of instructor that most of us share as the person that frames the discourse of the second language learning environment, and, here, is assumed to have native speaker language proficiency.
- "teacher" represents a native speaker of the language, outside of the classroom and/or another teacher that the instructor may know.
- "the student (self)" represents the individual language learner that is attempting to learn the language.
- "another student" represents one or more students besides the self in class.
- "native speaker" denotes language proficiency only and not country of birth.
- "language" denotes the meaning carried in the classroom discourse (either in the first or second language).

If we include the universal elements involved in the discourse of a second language classroom (student, teacher, other student) then we can view the individual student's psychological responses to language and meaning as depicted by the following statements in (a) through (f).

a) *The teacher represents the language for another student.*

In this statement, the teacher constructs tasks that allow for language use and negotiation of meaning that are framed by the learners' level of language proficiency, and hence allowing for interaction and discourse to emerge. The psychological responses of the individual student in this case are affected and guided by the other students' reaction and interaction in the task provided. Meaning is repressed and constructed in relation to the general activity proposed by the teacher as interpreted by the other students (Kumaravadivelu, 1993, 1999). Intersubjectivity in this case may not be difficult to achieve because the language used during goal directed action is not beyond the learners' level of linguistic proficiency.

b) *The teacher represents the language for another teacher (native speaker).*

Here, the psychological response of the student differs from the first scenario because there is not an activity that directly involves student participation in this arena. The language being used during this

situation may be well beyond the proficiency level of the student and will not afford opportunities for negotiation of meaning. This, in turn, does not allow repression of the student's first language meaning system by the second language meaning system. Achieving intersubjectivity in this situation is extremely difficult because there may not be a common task that allows students to understand the goal of what the teacher may be saying (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). The teacher may be using another teacher (native speaker) as the point of reference for language use. In this situation, a student's psychological response (interpretation) is different from the teacher's expectation for linguistic reasons. Classrooms that operate mainly under the acquisition metaphor are more likely to reflect statement (b) than classrooms that operate under the participation metaphor.

c) *The student (self) represents the language for another teacher (native speaker).*

In this statement the student's language use and participation are placed within a task that allows for the decentering of the self in activity settings that allow for authentic language use in the classroom. In this setting, the instructor has provided the linguistic and contextual knowledge necessary for the student to be able to interact with a native speaker in a specific setting (a market, for example). This arena allows for repression of the first language meaning of market as the student begins to understand the meaning of the market in the target/second language as presented during the discourse of the activity (Lemke, 1985, 1990). However, activities such as these take a great deal of effort and time because there is usually only one teacher (native speaker) in the classroom that can interact with each student at one time. The type of psychological response elicited here may exemplify that of proficiency oriented tests or individual student interviews in the second language classroom. Hopefully, the instructor has allowed for repression of the first language meaning system by presenting various activity settings where students are scaffolded towards intersubjectivity by the instructor (as a facilitator) and by other students before attempting evaluation or assessment.

d) *The student (self) represents the language for another student.*

This is optimal situation that will allow for students to make use of the language learned as they attempt to reach intersubjectivity with one or more students during a goal oriented task that requires negotiation of meaning (Pica, 1987). Repression of first language meaning systems may

not be happening at equal rates (Long & Porter, 1985); however, this type of discourse is guided by the participation metaphor where scaffolding amongst students is active and essential.

e) *The language represents the teacher (native speaker) for another student.*

f) *The language represents the student (self) for another teacher (native speaker).*

The psychological and linguistic responses of the student in the above statements, (e) and (f), are those measured during formal assessment. There is no immediate, active scaffolding that can be performed during these scenarios because the relationship amongst language, teacher, and student (or language, student, teacher) is linear and unidirectional (Lave &Wegener, 1991). That is, if intersubjectivity and the repression of an individual's first language meaning system are to occur, then there has to be either a teacher (native speaker) or student at each end of these statements (Todorov, 1984; Tudge, 1990). Arguably, assessment may allow for, or assist in, the repression of meaning systems, but this may not happen until the individual student has received feedback from the teacher (native speaker) involved in the discourse of the second language classroom. The language that may be used in these two psychological responses is usually written. That is, either the student (the self) is reading and/or the student (the self) is composing.

The Practice of Education

Returning to Wells' (1999), the individual psychological responses that are evident in the following statements are reflected in his outline for building a community of inquiry:

a) *The teacher (native speaker) represents the language for another student*

c) *The student (self) represents the language for another teacher (native)*

d) *The student (self) represents the language for another student.*

Central to establishing a community of inquiry is allowing opportunities for students to repress their first language meaning systems as they are scaffolded by the other students, teachers, or native speakers while participating in the discourse of second language education (Brooks & Donato,1994; Rogoff, 1990). As students decenter themselves through

participation, they produce the target language, and as a result develop their language proficiency.

The practice of education in a second language classroom includes linguistic goals as well as aims to build the knowledge base of individuals through guided participation in the ZPD. Before, it was expressed that allowing for a Lacanian influenced theory of language would benefit the rate (success) more than the route (progression) of language learning. A key to language learning is production and interaction in the second language classroom (Hall, 1995a, 1995b). Without participation-oriented lessons and activities, students are asked to look beyond the linguistic properties and assign meaning without discourse. Fundamental to becoming proficient in a second language entails understanding language in use where appropriating meaning (the signified) is conceptually prior to the acquisition of the linguistic item (the signifier) produced during the discourse of a community of inquiry.

Activity and Consciousness: A Conclusion

Leontyev (1977) expresses that "[a person's] activity is shaped by the success or failure of [his or her] adaptation to [his or her] external environment" (p. 3). This activity orients and grounds the individual in the objective world, thus producing a consciousness where concepts are treated as psychological products and the results become attached to words. Furthermore, Luria (1981) proposed that without activity there is no motive.In other words, there is no such thing as activity without motive.

During goal directed action in a second language classroom, the instructor must be able to present a motive that will be reflected in the psychological responses of the students involved in an activity setting and in the discourse of second language education. Realistically, the motive should allow for both acquisition of rules and understanding of language meaning through participation as presented by Ellis (1985) and Hall (1995a, 1995b).

The fundamental elements that this paper has tried to explain in light of Lacan's theory of language within sociocultural premises have been the functions of cognition and knowledge in relation to second language acquisition. As presented throughout this article, if we allow for an understanding of the individual psychological responses to affect how we construct tasks, interaction, and language production in the

language classroom, then second language acquisition becomes linked to cognition and the development of a new meaning system that assists language learning. Unamuno (1927, 1940) extends our understanding of the dynamics involved in second language education when he states that psychology (cognition) is the primary realm of the individual, and one's comprehension is represented through interaction. That is, individual consciousness is constructed through activity that allows for expression of meaning and understanding which is realized as knowledge during social participation.

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