Voices in the Classroom Reveal ESL Teaching and Learning Paths

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Abstract

The ever-changing second language socio-cultural Puerto Rican classroom context calls for a transformation, one that acknowledges the ESL (i.e. English as a Second Language) students' voices. In order to empower students with their own ability to learn, teachers should integrate students' voices in their curriculum planning stages and decision making processes. Therefore, this article discusses the meanings students gave to their language learning happenings or experiences. Additionally, it reveals how reflective practices played an invaluable and significant role in understanding the learning issues involved in the classroom and to develop a systematic way to analyze and address these issues so as to bring about changes in the ESL socio-cultural classroom context.

Key words: language valorization, language learning happenings, reflective tasks, communities of learners, participatory interaction

Abstracto

En Puerto Rico, el contexto socio-cultural de Inglés como Segundo Idioma, llama a una transformación que reconozca las voces de los estudiantes que habitan en sus salones. Siguiendo esta línea de pensamiento y con el propósito de apoderar a los estudiantes de su aprendizaje, los educadores habrán de integrar las opiniones de sus discípulos, tanto en la planificación del currículo como en el proceso de toma de decisiones. Este artículo analiza, precisamente, los diferentes significados que los estudiantes le atribuyeron a sucesos o experiencias presentes. Además, revela cómo las

prácticas reflexivas resultaron esenciales para comprender los disímiles eventos o situaciones que ocurren a diario en las aulas. Más aún, cómo estas prácticas desarrollaron una manera sistemática de analizar y lidiar con dichos eventos, eventos que, en definitiva, redundan en posibles cambios al contexto socio-cultural específico del salón de Inglés como Segundo Idioma.

Palabras claves: *valorización del idioma, instancias de aprendizaje de un idioma,*

tareas reflexivas, comunidades de aprendices, participación continua e

interactiva

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Introduction

The ever-changing second language socio-cultural classroom context in

Puerto Rico calls for a transformation, one that acknowledges the ESL (i.e. English as

a Second Language) students' voices. Such a transformation must begin with the

learners themselves and the teachers must acknowledge them as a vital element in the

teaching and learning processes. By acknowledging these voices in the classroom,

the instructor can identify unique paths to ESL acquisition success.

This paper considers a number of successful second language learning paths

that foster ESL acquisition among first year college students at the University of

Puerto Rico (UPR). Among them are the learning happenings that encourage L2 (i.e.

second language) interactions and language valorization that is transformed as a result of participatory interactions.

The purpose of this research was to discover and analyze students' English language learning acquisition experiences in order to transform or improve classroom educational practices. The participants were college students at the University of Puerto Rico enrolled in Basic-English courses.

The study followed a qualitative approach. It employed data based on action research with phenomenological foundations. The data revealed that within the sociocultural classroom context meaningful L2 learning happenings emerge due to a close interrelationship of sociocognitive processes and sociocultural dispositions. Consequently, these interrelated components work systemically to further foster the construction of metacognitive processes, L2 learning and L2 interactions.

Furthermore, in educational contexts, language valorization processes transformed as a result of participatory interaction. The greater their participatory interaction, the more students valorized their second language. Then, the greater the interaction between these processes, the more their ongoing participation is transformed.

During our teaching practice at the University of Puerto Rico, we have employed diverse approaches, methods and strategies to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing in a second language. It should be noted that the students who enter the UPR have gone through approximately twelve years of ESL courses, but when they enter the university they still often lack basic English skills and hesitate to engage in L2 classroom activities and interactions.

Recently, however, a change in students' willingness and desire to learn, participate, and interact in classroom activities has surfaced. In addition to students' engagement with their L2 learning, their classroom performances during interactions and their cognitive skills have noticeably increased. Perhaps as we have integrated reflective practices, such as autobiographies, pre/post reflections, class reactions, self-assessments, peer evaluations, and our reflective-diary in the curriculum, students' L2 learning experiences have become more meaningfully engaging.

In order to understand the dynamics of the classroom, students are regularly encouraged to reflect upon classroom practices. Their reflections are consistently an integral part of the course's content because an analysis of classroom practices, from the students' perspective, are taken into consideration. Thus, reflective tasks have revealed our students' voices and provided insights to improve classroom pedagogical planning. Therefore, this article discusses the meanings students gave to their language learning happenings or experiences (i.e. while at the university). Additionally, it explores how reflective practices played an invaluable and significant role in understanding the learning issues involved in ESL classes and to develop a systematic way to analyze and address these issues in order to bring about changes in the ESL socio-cultural classroom context.

While at the University Level

A look at students' reflections revealed that while at the university language learning happenings increased their willingness to learn and interact using the English language. The learners mentioned that fostering L2 learning and interactions during

L2 learning happenings greatly depended on the use of meaningful instructional

strategies and resources, group work and L2 use.

Instructional Strategies and Resources

First of all, instructional strategies and resources had to be tactically and

dynamically selected so as to use language naturally in interactions. Some of the

instructional strategies and resources students mentioned as meaningful were as

follows:

> Internet, library resources, English/English dictionaries, peers,
> encyclopedias, movies, illustrations, maps, novels, songs, television,
> VCR, Lex Juris, magazines, history books, my peer's mother,
> dramatizations, debates, self-evaluations, reading selection
> discussions, investigations, documentaries, conferences, philosophies,
> tutors, reading selections of choice, "Blackboard", course packs, oral
> reports, group discussions, the professor, reference books and/or peer
> evaluations.

Students stated that through the use of these instructional strategies and resources

they acquired language skills which helped them in

> understanding spoken English better, expanding vocabulary, utilizing
> resources in English, learning to obtain facts and develop ideas for an
> essay, improving pronunciation, developing English reading
> comprehension, mastering the use of the language, reading an
> understanding novels and stories completely for the first time, feeling
> more at ease with using the language, enriching their class
> participation, and increasing their willingness to use the language.

Additionally they stated that through using these instructional strategies and

resources they were able to attain cognitive and academic skills. These moments

provided opportunities to

> be able to select reliable sources of information, understand how the
> university works and the diverse opportunities in it, receive help in
> other subjects and classes, increase reading speed and ability to see

things objectively and critically, identify with what was studied in class, determine if the correct field of study was chosen, develop love for reading, learn to analyze from different perspectives, develop computer skills and knowledge of other disciplines or topics, enrich intellect and expanding horizons, visualize what was being read, become aware of unknown things, enhance thinking skills with versatility, receive help in interpretation, acknowledge the value of reading, increase the ability to be independent as far as obtaining information, improve comprehension levels, improve speed and dexterity in dictionary use, learn to look beyond the words printed on the page, reaffirm that every day is a learning experience, apply what was learned outside of class, developing historical, cultural and social knowledge, and/or realize there is still much more left to learn.

Task Management

Secondly, for students group work was the optimal strategy to use in order

to accomplish tasks. They stated that tasks organized in groups had a

fair distribution and organization of the work to be done, reasonable time limit, division of students in terms of their major, the opportunity to choose the topic as well as the group partners, and/or the groups were free, equal, small, and focused.

These organized tasks expanded their learning horizons. Specifically, the perception

is that

accomplishing tasks in groups made them feel responsible for theirs and their peers learning and/or organization because they would divide tasks according to what each group member wanted to do, and chose topics to be analyzed according to one's interest.

They indicated that by dividing tasks in this way they were able to gain

language skills such as:

losing fear of speaking English, loosening up, understanding others who spoke English, gaining confidence in the English language, managing class discussions, correcting mistakes, correcting each other's speech errors, enhancing vocabulary, and/or following others line of thinking.

In terms of cognitive/academic skills gained through managing tasks in groups, students stated that they

> shared different ideas and opinions, improved knowledge of certain topics, developed interest towards the class, attained responsibility, comprehended reading selections effectively, understood the class, helped each other express themselves, developed better organization of ideas, created outlines, learned new concepts, attained more profound analysis, developed listening and synthesizing skills, developed complex ideas about a specific topic, made the topic theirs, developed responsibility, felt more prepared and confident; noticed who excelled, developed complex comprehension skills and/or put forth more effort so as to achieve something worthy in class.

L2 Use

Finally, L2 use was important while at the university level; however, students relied more on collective interaction between teacher-student, student-teacher, and student-student. According to the learners, the languages used in classroom interactions throughout the year were the following:

> almost everything was in English, except the instances where questions were raised about certain words; little by little Spanish was phased out; and even we spoke English in private meetings outside of class.

It should be noted that the learners mentioned the reason they used each language. First, when the learners used Spanish, it was because it was their native tongue, and they felt more comfortable speaking it because they would understand each other quicker. Also, when they got stuck trying to find certain words in English, sometimes Spanish was brought up. English was used because it is

> the universal language; it is important to know it; the language used in business settings; needed in the field of communications; needed in future situations in life and/or for general knowledge.

They mentioned that using the L2 in class allowed them to acquire

 more experience in speaking, improved diction and fluency in English, and understood a wider range of vocabulary choices, grammar, practice, and/or self-correction in pronunciation.

Additionally, they mentioned that they

improved pronunciation, learned new words, developed listening and speaking skills, attained fluency, increased correctness when speaking, practiced English, improved writing skills, practiced using the language appropriately, improved skills through reading selections, corrected each other's language use, achieved effective communication, avoided stuttering and stammering, delivered the message without confusion, and/or increased their language abilities little by little.

Furthermore, they declared that

language usage grew; concepts acquired were put into practice; pronunciation was improved; speech improved; and/or reading selections became easier to understand. Students learned from their mistakes, had quicker comprehension, improved writing skills, practiced English, spoke faster, learned to pose questions, improved their understanding, read in another language, accepted their weaknesses, expressed their ideas in English without the need to translate, and/or acknowledged that they were able to learn in another language. They developed their language use; and/or spelled words correctly; little by little their participation increased; writing was strengthened; and/or students used the language in everyday situations outside of class; and/or they acknowledged the quantity and quality of their performance using the language.

Additionally, students stated that by using the L2 they improved

cognitive/academic skills such as:

developing a topic or idea that arose during the class, testing their abilities, using ideas from this class in other classes, contributing to the analysis with ideas from other classes, getting used to hearing and speaking the language, improving themselves, noticing other's improvement, and/or realized theirs and others' true potential.

They also felt that the interactions helped them to

> prepare for classes such as Business English, apply knowledge in other courses, do quicker brainstorms, get more out of class, participate in class, learn new concepts and facts, become aware that they do not know everything, create and develop a sense of discipline and responsibility, improve critical thinking skills, develop thought processes without getting stuck, become more focused, improve individually and as a group, question old ideas, and/or to understand the reading selections learned to apply what was learned in class in other life situations, obtain answers to questions, construct ideas coherently, become aware that they could continue improving, notice everything that they could do, have quicker thinking, show academic improvement, associate concepts, expand knowledge and critical thinking skills, in general realize personal potential, and/or test their progress.

Reflective tasks strongly attest to how language learning interactions, (i.e. teacher-student, student-teacher, student-student) and the dyadic relationship that is fostered through these interactions, play an especially valuable role in learning and development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). These interactions and relationships have to encompass the students' socio-cultural contexts. It is often in the context of these interactions and relationships that students move through the zone of proximal development. In other words, learning occurs through social interactions as learners engage in culturally meaningful productive activity with the responsive assistance of a more competent other, thus creating a community of learners (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Therefore, language learning is conceptualized as a socio-cultural and socio-cognitive process within a specific socio-cultural context that has the capacity to foster L2 language learning and L2 interactions.

Furthermore, through these reflective practices one was able to acknowledge that changes should be made in learning happenings so as to foster L2 learning and

L2 interactions. These changes emerged from the students' active and critical

engagement with their own cognitive processes and those of their peers. Learners

recommended ideas in terms of instructional strategies and resources, teacher's role,

task management, students' role, and language use. In essence, the majority of the

ideas point to a participatory and systemic approach to classroom practices. In

examining the elements of this approach, instructional strategies and resources should

be multidisciplinary and integrative; the teacher's role should be one of a facilitator

and mediator rather than a leader; tasks should be organized through collaborative

groups that promote a sense of ease in the construction of knowledge; the student's

role should be one of an active participant who constructs his/her knowledge and

helps others build on this knowledge; and L2 use should emphasize L2 collective

interaction, whereby co-participants negotiate meaning.   All of these elements

represent the foundation of a complex system. This system is best described as a

"community of learners", where teachers and students are co-participants in

constructing and understanding the world based on their own and their peers' socio-

cultural dispositions and a shared socio-cultural classroom context. Therefore,

language learning takes place at both intra-psychological (i.e. self-regulated) and

inter-psychological (i.e. regulated by others) levels (Vygotsky, 1962).

Additionally, the information generated by the reflective documents allowed

us to ascertain and confirm that education's humanizing mission to liberate persons

can only be reached through deep, concrete, and objective self-reflection (Freire,

1985). Such self-reflection is the dual responsibility of the students and teachers in

order to gain freedom from meaningless education processes. Thus, language

teachers and students must critically reflect on classroom interactions, so as to deliver a curriculum that lies within a socio-cultural context. Additionally, language learners must become more independent and learn to make choices and to initiate activities. They should be actively responsible for their own learning and aware of the strategies that will help them improve. In particular, they should be able to use self-evaluation to improve language performance. Meta-cognitive abilities are considered crucial and closely related to one's language learning performance (Bialystok, 2001; Hamers & Blanc, 2003). Cognitive development is fostered when individuals become active critics of their own cognitive processes. Therefore, transformation in the language classrooms has to begin with the learners themselves and with the teachers who have acknowledged them as a vital element in the teaching and learning process (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983).

All in all, analysis of the reflective-tasks results revealed that L2 happenings become meaningful when they encompass socio-cultural dispositions, socio-cognitive processes, and socio-cultural classroom context, all working interactively for the common goal of constructing knowledge. When reflective practices are included in L2 classrooms, language learners become aware of their own cognitive processes while listening, speaking, reading, writing, and carrying out other language activities. These practices allow ESL learners to perform successfully and effectively as active and organized learners. L2 classroom teachers must recognize the importance of encouraging students to think about the way they learn, about how they judge their progress, and about the impact classroom practices have on their ability to learn and interact using the L2. In order to empower students with their own ability to learn,

teachers should integrate students' voices in their curriculum planning stages and decision making processes. Therefore, if L2 teachers want to create environments where students actively engage in their own education, they should include reflective practices as one of their methodological components.

Reminiscing on the information in students' reflections, we have come to see that students discovered a new understanding. The data implies that

> in sharing ideas, members were committed to understanding one another as well as practice English. They shared with interlocutors, practiced, learned, and completed the assigned tasks. Group work also served as a context to cooperate with one another, deal with different opinions, divide the work among the group members and agree upon some aspects. In addition to developing vocabulary, grammar and writing skills, the reflections gave the idea that learners regard English as an important cognitive tool. The data implied that learners engage in multiple English-speaking situations, referred to diverse resources available, and used more than one language to assist them in completing tasks correctly. English became important. These moments of success seemed to also develop the learners' appreciation of the English language.

The information provided in these reflections suggests that English language experiences led them to higher levels of ESL thinking and L2 development. As students entered their university lifestyle, their vocabulary changed to a more decontextualized one. For example, initially they speak of reading and doing homework. Then, they speak of analysis and interpretation to understand an L2 task. Secondly, they referred to the assistance of others in understanding and completing the task, whereas in class the emphasis is on group work. Hamers and Blanc (2003) contend that "the attribution of certain positive values to language as a functional tool, that is, as an instrument which will facilitate the fulfillment of communicative and cognitive functioning" (p.9) signifies a language valorization process.

As seen, language valorization is constructed working cooperatively with proficient L2 interlocutors. In these contexts, students attributed an important value to English by participating interactively in L2 tasks, using both Spanish and English and referring to peers and educational materials. In these contexts, students' participatory interaction led them to attribute an important value to English. Students referred to these human and physical resources because they were deemed the most effective way to find L2 knowledge and learn the language. These peers guided the students; however, once the knowledge was acquired, students assumed responsibility for their own learning. Thus, the greater their participatory interaction, the more they valorized the second language.

The curricular implications point to a transformation of students' English language valorization. The participation of interlocutors to complete tasks moved them from an individual to a collective style of working. A curriculum directed toward cooperative efforts promotes that students and teachers work together to pursue goals and objectives.

Participatory interaction while completing tasks led them to use human and physical resources, including their first language. They referred to these resources because they were deemed the most effective way to find knowledge and learn L2. The human resources guided the process to learn L2, but then students assumed responsibility for their own learning. Rogoff (1995) believed that individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation. Students also referred to these resources because they had instrumental and integrative motivations. Brown (2001) elaborated that intrinsically motivated

rewards are powerful because the behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself; therefore, the behavior itself is self-rewarding. They also referred to these resources because they viewed the instrumental and integrative value of English. Furthermore, they referred to these resources because they believed that through alternative means other than those used in school was the best way to learn L2 (Krashen, 1995).

The participation of interlocutors in diverse activities gave them the opportunity to bring their ESL experiences to the interaction and create the "zone" (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone was like an open envelope where communication flowed and learners negotiated meaning to understand L2 academic tasks. Participatory interaction in the zone allowed students to build a scaffold with language valorization (Wood, 1980). This scaffold led students to reach L2 learning and awakened the internal process of human development.

In addition, through participatory interaction their L2 became part of thought as well as a tool of thought. The participation of interlocutors in diverse activities gave them the opportunity to move from simple conversations in Spanish to a combination of L2 linguistic strategies. Participatory interaction allowed students to transform their basic L2 skills into higher mental functions through dialogues because of the group diversity in terms of knowledge and experience. Participatory interactions also allowed students to internalize effective ways to communicate in English and complete their L2 academic tasks in a cooperative environment. This analysis builds on the Vygotskian perspective that the use of cultural tools mediates

the process of cognitive development and helps develop higher cognitive processes through social interactions (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

The interpretation of Vygotskian concepts as depicted in Tudge and Scrimsher (2003) construes that in the course of interaction with the more competent member, individuals transform the internalized interaction.   That is, interactions permit the individual to internalize language behavior as a cognitive tool. Consistently, as an individual's environment attaches certain values to the language, the individual, taking the environment as a model and through the process of socialization, internalizes those values important for the significant others. The individual eventually and uses those values in social and cognitive processes (Hamers & Blanc, 2003).

Tudge and Scrimsher's (2003) interpretation of the Vygotskian concepts of internalization that occur in teacher-student interactions creating the zone of proximal development is also extended to processes that occur outside the classroom walls. Apparently, learning at the university is influenced and functions in a dynamic relation of social interaction. Consistently, the process of language valorization serves as important mediators in language learning.

The complex world of L2 teaching, which inspired the implementation of reflective thinking, helped these researchers discover the *what* of the English language learning process and the *how* of those processes. First of all, we discovered that students' reflections generated valuable information concerning English language learning in Puerto Rico. A distinct learning experience was participatory interaction. As Rogoff (1995) puts it, individuals transform in their understanding and

responsibilities of activities through their active participation. Participatory

interaction at school provided the context for developing L2. This context provided

opportunities for the construction of language valorization. The development of these

processes also defined the human development aspect of L2 learning (Rogoff, 2003).

Conclusion

These reflections demonstrate something different from what frequent

publications have documented. There is a myth which alleges that after twelve years

of instruction students do not know English; and it is exactly that, a myth. Secondly,

it is not that L2 learners do not know or resist learning English; it is simply that we

should consider the context in which L2 learning is developed.

These reflections focused not on how college students master the

particularities of the language, but on how they *experience* learning and use their

second language. The acquisition of English for them is not an unmotivated failure,

but a rich bilingual experience that enhances their willingness to communicate. It is

not a lexical system to be applied in sociocultural contexts; it is a powerful "zone" for

the interaction of happenings and processes that foster ESL acquisition. Thus,

willingness overcomes resistance.

What we are saying is that L2 learning arises in a series of dynamic

interactions among the individual and the socio-cultural context. Thus, their L2

acquisition experiences will only be usefully understood when we consider the

multiple and meaningful interactions of individual and context that occur in the daily

lives of L2 learners.   We have also seen that the individual's contribution to the

production of such interactions and the resources available in authentic activities influence the "flow" of the interaction. Therefore, when one changes the context, the results also change.

In conclusion, the stakeholders in education processes must be sensitive to the students' affective relationship with the English language as well as the sociocultural and the sociocognitive reality of ESL learning.

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