LANGUAGE LEARNING ACROSS THE SCALE: PERSPECTIVES FROM BRAZILIAN ESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: The present work is part of the discussion held by School of Advanced Studies in Language and Society at Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). The aim of this paper is to discuss findings from an ESL study conducted in 2014 once many issues remained unexplored. Findings suggest that students who took part in the research are assuming a dual behaviour towards their learning. On the one hand they show interest and commitment to learning, on the other, they show insecurity and do not seem to be pro-active during class. This issue will be discussed in light of two concepts approached during the course: the notion of Scale discussed by Blommaert (2010) and the notion of Stance present in the work done by Jaffe (2009). Drawing on both concepts, the research context will be understood as affected by participant’s mobility, which allows a perspective that understands learning as influenced by external forces. We suggest that participants assume different stances as language learners, and by doing that, their concept of ‘learning’ assumes a mobile perspective as well. They seem to find their learning effective in a lower scale, positioning themselves as potential learners, whilst this belief is delegitimized when traveled to a higher scale, where they assume a stance of “no significant learner”, therefore showing a dual behaviour.

Keywords: Second Language Learning. Globalization. Stance.

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Com base em ambos os conceitos, o contexto de pesquisa será entendido como afetado pela mobilidade dos participantes, o que permite uma perspectiva que entende que a aprendizagem é influenciada por forças externas. Nós sugerimos que os participantes assumem diferentes posicionamentos como aprendizes de LE, e ao fazermos isso, o conceito ‘aprendizagem’ assume uma perspectiva também móvel. Eles parecem entender a aprendizagem como eficiente em uma baixa escala, posicionando-se como aprendizes em potencial, enquanto essa crença é deslegitimizada quando posta em uma escala alta, onde eles assumem um posicionamento de “aprendiz não significante”, demonstrando, portanto, um duplo comportamento.


**INTRODUCTION**

The qualitative and ethnographic-based research\(^2\) sought to investigate the (pre) conceptions of adult learners and a teacher concerning the relation between mother tongue and foreign language, and how the use of both languages occurs during a basic level English class at a Language Teaching Center\(^3\) in a public university located in São Paulo state, Brazil. Fifteen students and a teacher took part in the research, which consisted of classroom observation, interview with the teacher and surveys filled out by students. The teacher was an undergraduate student in Linguistics, whereas the students varied among undergraduate students and university staff. The English Language Center (ELC) is located inside university and has been operating since 2011, coordinated by professors from the Department of Modern Languages.

Findings suggested that students and teacher believe the mother-tongue should be used during class. Classroom observation revealed that students make use of the mother-tongue to ask and answer questions, to make language association and to relate day-to-day

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\(^2\) FAPESP (Process 14/04667-2).

\(^3\) CEL – Centro de Ensino de Línguas

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experiences with something learnt in class. On the other hand, teacher uses Portuguese to explain grammar concepts, define vocabulary and translate sentences. While the use of Portuguese appeared to optimize learning in some moments, in others it seemed to let students and teacher's communication less dynamic. Yet, during the interview, the teacher attested that he used to speak most of the time in English during class, but he had issues with that:

Teacher: I use Portuguese in class now, actually, I have never taught an entire class only in English. [...] Even though using only English in class as input may look nice in a course planning, I, myself, had issues because I overused English, so I try to mix both languages, mostly when teaching ESL beginners.

Researcher: What sort of issues did you have?

Teacher: Students complaining because they could not follow up classes. (Personal communication, June 15, 2014)

So the teacher attempted to change his behaviour in class, in order to adequate himself to students’ needs and wants. Likewise, classroom observation showed the English class as a welcoming and safe place, once teacher showed enthusiasm, and teacher-student relationship was friendly. Every beginning of class, students handed in the assigned homework, showing commitment. However, there was a lack of students’ pro-activity in orally answering questions posed by the teacher. Whether this could be due to their shyness, insecurity or lack of confidence to speak, the result was a very limited production in the target-language. That said, if on one hand there was a committed and friendly teacher with a group of students eager to learn, on the other there were those same students missing self-confidence and making little progress, even though the teacher had tried to adapt his performance in class.
This issue remained unexplored until recent readings and discussions offered by the School of Advanced Studies in Language and Society, which provided support to analyze the question considering the research context as affected by participants’ mobility. Drawing on Blommaert’s sociolinguistics of globalization (2010) and Jaffe’s notion of Stance (2009), we will try to discuss how can students seem insecure and not show much pro-activity in class, at the same time as they are committed and eager to learn. In light of the question, surveys filled by three participants, Ana, Roberto and Laura⁴ were selected and will be analyzed here. In the end, we suggest that students assume different stances as language learners, and by doing that, their concept of ‘learning’ assumes a mobile perspective as well.

The paper starts with a literature review. Then, we will present the collected data from the surveys filled out by three participants in the study. Finally, we will bring up a discussion of the new findings in light of the concepts approached, addressing further issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research and theories in Applied Linguistics in the modern era presented a trend in studying the language from apolitical and non-historical perspectives, which sought to find a homogeneity of effective teaching methods to language learners (Pennycook, 1990). Further development of a Critical Applied Linguistics, term used by Pennycook (1990), Rajagopalan (2003), among others, led to a shift in how Applied Linguistics research are conducted in the post-modern era. That said, research begun to problematize concepts related to language, ethics, identity, policy and ideologies of languages, being necessary the researcher to assume a “reflective and inquiring attitu-

⁴ Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

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de towards phenomena of life” (Signorini, 2003, p.381). In Brazil, researchers begun to make an “indisciplinary” Applied Linguistics (Moi-
ta Lopes et. al, 2006), term used in opposition to the notion of a bounded discipline that organizes different areas of knowledge. “Indisciplinarity” turns eyes to social practices that are critical and transgressive to language. A transgressive approach, in turn, assumes the necessity to break political and epistemological boundaries, in order to inquire a reflexive stance towards action and change (Pennycook, 2006, p.82). Such concepts are part of what is called a new sociolinguistics, which assumes a way of research in AL that is intrinsic and inseparable from transformations that affect the world, and in that perspective, sociolinguistics is attached to Globalization. The term Globalization assumes a multilingual world (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Blommaert, 2010) and super-diverse, with a hybrid and multimodal repertoire, mobile and complex. In that sense, speech communities cannot be restricted to a defined time and space, because there is a dynamism not seen before in communication. This dynamism influences language ideologies, once language groups and speakers are hybrid.

When those speakers move from one space to another, the message travels within, creating a space full of “codes, norms and expectations” (Blommaert, 2010, p.40). To understand the concept of Globalization, the notion of ‘scale’ illustrates how events and processes occur. Based on the metaphor of ‘scale’ used by Fairclough (2006), Blommaert argues that there are scales which draw binary relationships of micro and macro, such as individual and collective, specific and general, local and translocal, subjective and objective, and so on. Therefore, a message assumes a new meaning every time it travels between low and high scale. Nonetheless, scales assume an
indexical connection to each other, for the understanding of a message relies on indexical social and cultural norms. In order to be understood, the speaker ought to travel the message from the lower scale to the higher scale (the two directions of indexicality), and create a new message. Yet, Blommaert (2010) states that the space in which the message travels is not horizontal, but rather vertical:

Scales offer us a vertical image of space, of space as stratified and therefore power-invested; but they also suggest deep connections between spatial and temporal features. In that sense, scale may be a concept that allows us to see sociolinguistic phenomena as non-unified in relation to a stratified, non-unified image of social structure. (p.42, italics in original)

In that sense, events do not occur only in space, but also in time. Images of society are brought up when events and messages travel from a TimeSpace situated in a lower scale to a higher scale.

Table 1: Blommaert and the concept of Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower scale</th>
<th>Higher scale</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Momentary</td>
<td>Timeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Local, situated</td>
<td>Translocal, widespread</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from The sociolinguistics of globalization, p.43, by J. Blommaert, 2010, Cambridge: Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact.

Again, a lower scale places messages and events in a micro level, specific, while a higher scale deals with messages and events in a macro level, general. A higher scale is filled with power-related forces that index social norms. In interactions, a jump from one scale to another is very frequent, and indexes expectations from both parties of the conversation. When the message is placed at a scale, the speaker assumes a position towards the forces that operate in the scale, being that a stance.

The stance of the speaker have been discussed by Alexandra
Jaffe (2009), who did a careful review about different approaches to the notion of stance in relation to the sociolinguistics area. In her work, Jaffe (2009) attests that stance is a practice emergent in interaction, but is not something transparent, once it can point out many social identities or one social identity, what demands an analysis of the socio historical context. One of the general objectives of the sociolinguistic approach of stance would be to study how subjects’ social papers relate to determined forms of stance.

Inside the notion of stance, Jaffe (2009) mentions metasociolinguistics and ideological dimensions to stance, which subjects may take by a certain stancetaking. Stancetaking is seen as a subject’s stance associated to certain stereotypes, discourses, identities, which are found in speech variation. Therefore, subjects may position themselves in relation to concepts of language and identity, conscious or not about this stance. Regarding sociolinguistics dimensions, Jaffe (2009) mentions as being a collective stance phenomena, which induces speakers to use sociolinguistics indexicalities which have a potential of change. That is to say, if speakers take a certain stance that index sociolinguistic norms and expectations, those expectations may change the way by which stance use to happen previously. This way, stance is something vulnerable, which may undergo changes depending on how human interaction develops, it is not an exclusive and timeless position.

In the next section, we will present the data collected in light of the conceptual approach developed.

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

Surveys completed by three students will be considered. As mentioned before, fifteen students completed the survey, however,
data collected from four questions answered by three students will be analyzed. All three participants chosen have learned English during public Elementary and High School, and the English Language Center is the first experience they are having with formal teaching after school years. Ana and Laura are both 22 years old, while Roberto is 54. Ana and Laura are undergraduate students, Roberto works at the university’s Human Resources Center. When asked about the reason why they wanted to study English, answers were as followed:

Roberto: The first reason why I want to learn English is because today English is like the computer: if you don’t have it, you’re left behind. I want to go to USA in the near future, so I need to have at least 30% of the language.

Ana: I want to learn English to have another skill to add to my résumé, to travel without the need of a guide, to talk to people from other countries, to understand songs, movies, and to read books that have not been translated.

Laura: I want to learn English because the worker who speaks English and other foreign languages has more opportunities in the job market. I also want to speak better because I want to apply to a university exchange program.

We can infer two main reasons why all three participants are interested in learning the language: the first one is related to their willing to climb the career ladder, while the second one is related to their willing to travel abroad. There seems to be a necessity and a desire to learn, whereas they believe it may benefit their professional and personal life. Moreover, the alikeness found in the answers may evoke the linguistic imperialism of the English language, vastly discussed by Pennycook (1998), a language that is positioned in a high standard by its learners. Still, participants seem to put themselves in
a minor stance in relation to those who speak English, as seen, for instance, in Roberto’s and Ana’s response, both that appears to evoke the image of the non-English speaker as an outsider. Although Ana may be capable of traveling abroad, and is filled with resources to watch movies with subtitles and search for songs’ translations online, she wants to place herself as someone who is able to speak English in the future, in order to assume an enlightened stance. As for Laura, she has a goal, which is to apply to an exchange program, and feels the need to “speak better”, assuming the lack of fluency may affect her experience abroad. Regardless their needs and wants, they assume a stance opposed to those who are fluent in English, but, so far, they all have a goal, or somewhere they want to get with their learning.

STANCE AND PRACTICES

Carrying on with the analysis, the other two questions in the survey were concerned to student’s opinion about skills one should have when learning a foreign language. The first question was “in your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good learner of a foreign language?” while the second question was “How do you study/practice a foreign language?” In the foreground, we hope to see whether they see themselves as potential learners, and how their relation with the English language was presented in their daily life. Responses for the first question were as follows:

Roberto: First, a good learner needs to like the language. Second, he needs to read, write, listen and be very much interested in learning. Third, he needs to practice every day.

Ana: The learner needs to pay attention to classes and have discipline to study at home.

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Laura: A good learner is the one who practices what he learnt in class every day.

Their answers to the question seem to converge to the idea of “learning” divided in two moments: a first moment of an in-classroom learning and a second moment of an outside classroom practice. Nonetheless, all participants have the image of a good learner as someone who makes effort. Ana’s and Laura’s answers show the in-classroom moment alternated with outside classroom studies. Yet, when they say the good learner “practices what he learnt in class” and “pays attention to classes and has discipline to study at home”, the outside classroom practice may be related to topics and situations approached in class. Roberto’s answer, on the other hand, seems to see the good learner as someone closer to a self-taught kind of person, as he mentions the interest in the language and in learning, and the search for things to read, write and listen.

Moving on to the second question related to the study and the practice of the language, responses were as follows:
Roberto: I practice through books, computer, films and mostly songs.
Ana: I practice on the web, through websites.
Laura: I do my homework, I also like to try to translate songs, and I have an app in my mobile which helps me with many exercises.

Interestingly, all students mention a virtual practice, either in their computer or in their mobiles, showing there is some sort of virtual mobility connected to their learning. Laura is the only that mentions a connection to classes, when she says she does her homework. Yet, learning seems to go beyond homework activities and classroom practices, and could be extended to their mobile lives. In that sense, English may be present in their leisure activities such as watching a film, listening to a song, reading a book, on virtual platforms on the
web and in their mobiles, therefore connected to their lives. Moreover, when we look back to the previous question about the good learner’s skills, we see Roberto, Ana and Laura match and go beyond their definition of a good learner, showing interest in the language and awareness of their practices. That said, they see themselves as good learners and take the stance of a potential learner who does his best to achieve his goals.

Finally, the last question to be analyzed here deals with a general approach of learning, being that: “in your opinion, what should people do in order to effectively learn a language? (For instance, you could mention the best environment to learn)”. Responses were as follows:

Roberto: There is no doubt that traveling abroad and living in a country that speaks the language are the best options to learn a language. But if you are able to study at a Language School, it’s a start.

Ana: It depends. Of course it is easier for those who can afford going abroad, but I think that studying at a Language School and practice at home may help.

Laura: [people should] study grammar, read books in English, and go on exchange to another country, if possible.

Again, there seems to be a pattern in the answers. All participants mention traveling abroad as an effective way to learn a language, however, they understand it as a possibility for those who can afford. The second instance mentioned particularly by Roberto and Ana is the Language School, which consists in centers widespread in Brazil, specialized in teaching languages. Language Schools usually have a brand, use a determined set of textbooks, and organize students in small groups depending on their learning stage. It has been a concept of learning already well established in Brazil, and according to
Robert and Ana, those schools “may help” and “it’s a start”, if the person is not able to go abroad. In that sense, Language Schools appear to be a second option, if traveling is out of question. In Laura’s view, an exchange seems to be the most likely option, apart from studying grammar and reading books. What calls out attention, however, is the fact that neither Roberto, Laura nor Ana have been abroad or have done a course at a Language School before, and yet, they have not mentioned university’s Language Teaching Center as a possibility.

Now, we do not believe their current effort has been in vain, but rather try to consider their “learning” at different places of a scale. When this learning travels from a lower scale to a higher scale, it gives a new meaning to its learners and it affects how they assume a determined stance towards learning and society. In that sense, a lower scale could be understood as their own learning in the classroom context, and their individual effort to learn the language. At a higher scale, they would place their learning in relation to society’s beliefs and expectations.

DISCUSSION

If we look back to the questions in the survey, we could see they are pointing towards a certain level at the scale, as for in the question “How do you study/practice a foreign language?”. In this question it is possible to understand a minor context approach, related to the student’s perspective towards their own context of learning. This question assumes a local perspective, situated in a determined time and space, as for students’ answers reflected on their studies in relation to in-classroom and outside classroom practices,
and concerned their daily life. Counterpoising this question with the question “in your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good learner of a foreign language?”, it was possible to observe a great deal in common between the answers, once students placed themselves as “good learners”. In this minor level, students assumed a stance of potential learners at the Language Teaching Center, showing effort and will to achieve their goals, whilst their learning showed consistency.

This belief appears to be delegitimized in the answers for the question “in your opinion, what should people do in order to effectively learn a language?” The question itself places “learning” at a higher scale, once it is broader, referring to Brazilians in general, and could be translated as a widespread belief of learning English in Brazil. Student’s context of learning was not mentioned in their answers, and have been replaced by Language Schools’ context and trips abroad. When answering this question, students took a stance of an ordinary Brazilian, and ignored the effectiveness of their own learning context. This stance could index expectations from Brazilian society in general, and could relate learning according to the socioeconomic status of the learner. Therefore, students’ answers are assuming a translocal perspective which approaches the concept of effective “learning” at defined instances. However, those instances mentioned are no longer applicable to their local context.

That said, there seems to be a complex system within learning a foreign language, once learners themselves have shown to be affected by higher instances of learning. When Roberto, Ana and Laura mention other contexts as the best environments to learn a language, they are delegitimizing their own capability of learning. In that sense, students feeling uncomfortable to speak in class could not on-

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ly rely on an issue of teaching and learning practices, but could also be a reaction to external social and political forces that are operating in that context and indexing certain status or expectations. At the same time, if we narrow learning to students’ daily practice, they show interest and engagement, once their practice is not being compared to other instances of learning. Yet, we would like to address here that virtual mobility may play a role on how learners oscillate from one context to the other. The present research could not investigate this issue, however, participants’ answers displayed the existence of a virtual context, apart from the contexts mentioned.

Finally, learning seems not to be attached to a local time and space, but rather spread amongst different places, connected to a virtual reality and to macro contexts. Assuming this perspective, teaching can no longer be momentary and situated, whilst learners do not assume only one defined stance towards their learning, they as well move, as they are placed across the scale.

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