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Bridging the Gap between EFL and ELF through Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract

The aim of this personal reflection is to revisit the major concepts that have informed my academic research in the area of applied linguistics and second language development, and show how my overall pedagogical approach has evolved, thanks to the contribution of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT). The main focus of this paper is on the phenomenon of language variation in English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) contexts, and especially its impact on the English of the classroom. In particular, I will consider the importance of embracing diversity in ELF, by adopting a post-normative response to learners' use of English, and explain how SCT and ELF studies may converge. For instance, this is possible when students are involved in authentic communication tasks, through web-mediated telecollaboration projects. I will conclude this paper by saying that approaching language variability with an open mind is necessary if we believe that ELT should be connected to the world outside the classroom and to the process of change that English is undergoing nowadays.

Keywords: *Sociocultural Theory, English as a Lingua Franca, Learners' Errors, Linguacultural Identity*

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¹Introduction

The occasion of the publication of this special issue in honor of Professor James E. Lantolf has been particularly timely in light of my recent efforts to explore new and innovative ideas in the area of applied linguistics. Having opted for the *personal reflection* format, my intention would be to take this unique opportunity to reflect back on the long path I have been travelling in doing my research into English language teaching (ELT), from the early days of my career,

¹ This paper is part of a special issue (2024, 46) entitled: In Honour of James P. Lantolf's Contributions to Sociocultural Theory, Second Language Development and Language Pedagogy (edited by Mirosław Pawlak, Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, and Hassan Mohebbi).

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when I carried out my first study on error analysis², to my later work (e.g., Grazzi, 2018b) on the pedagogical implications of the emergence and spread of English as the world's primary lingua franca (ELF), seen through the lenses of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT, Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, Lantolf, 2000, Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, Lantolf, Poehner & Swain, 2018).

Over the last fifteen years, this ongoing intellectual journey into the intricacies of second language development has been largely inspired by Professor Lantolf's (2000) work, and by some of the younger scholars who contributed to his relentless research in this area, like Professor Steven L. Thorne (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and Professor Matthew E. Poehner (e.g., Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). To my main regret, I wish I had had the opportunity to learn about Professor Lantolf's studies much earlier. I still wonder why, in my formative years, studies on SCT were not as influential as other approaches in applied linguistics, particularly in the European academic context. One reason might be that Vygotsky's psychology and pedagogy, which are ingrained in Marx's historical materialism (Ratner & Silva, 2017), suffered from a long political and cultural ostracism in the Western world. For instance, *Thought and Language*, one of Vygotsky's most celebrated works, was published posthumously in the Soviet Union, in 1934, but was first published in English in 1962, and in Italian in 1990. Nevertheless, it should not surprise the reader that even in the USSR Vygotsky's innovative studies on the human mind were hampered and censored by the Stalinist regime.

My intent here is to revisit the major concepts that have informed my academic research, and show the importance of SCT in orienting my studies on the phenomenon of language variation in ELF contexts. In particular, I will focus on the reconceptualization of learners' deviations from standard norms in the English classroom and the way SCT and ELF studies may converge.

Embracing Diversity in ELF: A Post-normative Response to Learners' Use of English

Indeed, the so-called communicative revolution (Widdowson, 1978) was in full bloom in the 1980s, when I was a recent graduate who started his career as an Italian high-school teacher of English. That was the time when massive institutional teacher-training programs³ (the way teacher education programs were called at that time) were based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (e.g., Wilkins, 1976, Widdowson, 1978, Canale & Swain, 1980, Candlin, 1981), that promising new approach to second language education, which "drew on the work of British functional linguists (e.g., John Firth, M. A. K. Halliday), American work in Sociolinguistics (e.g., Dell Hymes, John Gumperz, and William Labov), as well as work in philosophy (e.g., John Austin and John Searle)." (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 64). This strong impulse toward a new paradigm in foreign language teaching methodology came as a

²In 1986, I graduated from the University of Rome "La Sapienza", and discussed a thesis in Methodology in English Language Teaching, entitled: *Analysis of the Interlanguage of Italian Learners of English. A working hypothesis*.

³For instance, in 1977-78 the Italian Ministry of Education launched the Special Foreign Languages Project (PSLS). Dozens of Italian teachers were sent each year to the United States, France and Germany for intensive courses in didactics and methodology of teacher training. Then they would hold annual 100-hour courses, with follow-up programs in most of the Italian provinces, in the following years. In a decade, the PSLs trained about half of English and French teachers and three quarters of German teachers. (Adapted from Balboni, 2009, p. 114).

response to the changing scenario in international socio-political relationships and to the growing demand for an approach to L2 teaching/learning based on a pragmatic view of language. Between the 1970's and the 1980's, the accelerated development of the European Common Market - which fostered the interdependence of member states, their cultural cooperation and the effective teaching of major European languages - was the key factor that turned CLT into the right answer to the need for a more appropriate teaching/learning approach to any foreign language. As Richards and Rodgers (1986) observe, Wilkins's (1976) seminal book *Notional Syllabuses* "had a significant impact on the development of Communicative Language Teaching. The Council of Europe incorporated his semantic/communicative analysis into a set of specifications for a first-level communicative language syllabus." (p. 65) Nevertheless, it should not go unnoticed that notwithstanding CLT shifted its main focus on the development of the learner's communicative competence rather than on grammar accuracy⁴, Standard English (either the British RP or the American GA) continued to be considered the default target model in ELT. Hence, the more prestigious, albeit elitist and thinly spread, native-speaker varieties provided the benchmark for designing school syllabuses, establishing assessment and evaluation criteria, and defining incremental proficiency levels⁵.

Within this context, learners' errors came to be viewed as natural, necessary steps along the student's learning continuum (Dulay & Burt, 1972), and were therefore classified and analyzed as the observable phenomena through which it was possible to study the psycholinguistic processes behind second language learning (e.g., Corder, 1967, 1981). Consequently, the student's idiosyncrasies were considered indicators of the intermediate stages of the progress the learner would make to reach a hardly attainable, if not idealized, native-speaker competence. Corder (1981) makes an important distinction between two kinds of learner's errors:

[...] errors of performance will characteristically be unsystematic [e.g. slips of the tongue] and the errors of competence, systematic. [...]. It will be useful therefore hereafter to refer to errors of performance as mistakes, reserving the term error to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his *transitional competence*. (Emphasis added). (p. 10)

Interestingly, however, his (Corder, 1981), approach to the "language learner's language" (p. 26) is not prescriptive or guided by a superficial classificatory intent, but tries to elicit the embedded cognitive processes that lead the student to infer the foreign language norms through communication (i.e., a bottom-up perspective), or use his/her language competence

⁴Howatt (1984) makes a distinction between strong and weak communicative approaches in second language education. The former is based on teaching/learning activities that aim at reproducing real communication in authentic contexts of use, and excludes formal language practice. The latter, on the other hand, is focused on learners' achievement of communicative goals, but also integrates grammar teaching and structural practice into the second language syllabus.

⁵However, the primacy of standard English models in second language education has recently been replaced, at least within the EU, by a more open approach that promotes plurilingualism in language education. See, for instance, the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), which integrates the 2001 edition of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001).

strategically (Corder, 1981), even resorting to language transfer from the L1. Corder (1981) contends that

The only sentences in anyone's speech which could, I suggest with justice be called erroneous are those which are the result of some failure of performance. [...]. My principal reason for objecting to the terms error, deviant, or ill-formed is that they all, to a greater or lesser degree, prejudice the explanation of the idiosyncrasy. Now, one of the principal reasons for studying the learner's language is precisely to discover why it is as it is, that is, to explain it and ultimately say something about the learning process. If, then, we call his sentences deviant or erroneous, we have implied an explanation before we have ever made a description. (pp. 18-19)

Nevertheless, we may argue that, apart from Corder's advanced notion of the strategic role of the learner's native tongue and of languages other than the "target language" (TL, Selinker, 1972, p. 213), the presence of the L1 in second-language communication tended to be regarded as a major factor of interference with the L2 learning process, and one of the main causes of students' errors. For instance, according to Selinker's (1972) interlanguage hypothesis, learning a second language consisted in a process between two poles, the starting one being the learner's L1, and the final one being the L2, i.e., the TL. All the intermediate steps between these two extremes were called *interlanguage*⁶, that is an idiosyncratic dialect that, in Corder's (1981) words,

is regular, systematic, meaningful, i.e. it has a grammar, and is, in principle, describable in terms of a set of rules, some sub-set of which is a sub-set of the rules of the target social dialect. [The learner's] dialect is unstable (we hope) and is not, as far as we know, a 'langue' in that its conventions are not shared by a social group [...], and lastly, many of its sentences present problems of interpretation to any native speaker of the target dialect. (p. 17)

Challenging the Interlanguage Hypothesis from a Vygotskian Perspective

Today, in light of Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) SCT, we may object to Corder's understanding of interlanguage by observing that the British applied linguist conceived of the language-learner's language as the construct of the individual student, which would be hardly comprehensible because of its idiosyncratic features. On the contrary, according to SCT, all human verbal languages, including students' L2, are social artifacts that emerge and are internalized by the members of diverse discourse communities, in their attempt to negotiate meaning (e.g., see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, particularly Chapters 6 and 7). Indeed, what we may observe in L2 interactions within the communicative language classroom is that despite their deviations from standard norms, students usually a) make successful efforts to cope with the learning tasks

⁶ Tarone (2018) observes that between the late 1960s and the early 1980s "The general idea that the language of second language learners is an autonomous linguistic system, distinct from both a NL and TL, was developed at about the same time by three scholars. [...] Nemser (1971) referred to learner language as an 'approximative system,' and Corder (1967, 1981) called it 'transitional competence.' Eventually, the term 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972) was the one that caught on." (p. 1)

assigned by their teachers; b) are able to implement communicative strategies (e.g., accommodation); and c) develop their communicative competence by means of their participation to collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2006, Swain & Watanabe, 2013). Moreover, the communicative language classroom favors the reciprocal exchange of peer feedback and teacher feedback within a Vygotskian zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Chaiklin, 2003). This, Swain (2006) claims, activates the process of *languaging*, that is “the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. It is part of what constitutes learning. Languaging about language is one of the ways we learn language.” (p. 98)

Finally, one more fundamental distinction we should make between the interlanguage hypothesis and Vygotsky’s SCT concerns their opposite views of the role played by the L1 in the L2 learning process. While the former considers the learner’s native tongue a source of errors caused by the occurrence of negative interlanguage transfer, the latter values it as a resource whereby students mediate between their languacultural identities (Agar, 1994) and the new ways in which they express and negotiate meanings through a different language. As Lantolf (2006) explains:

Agar (1994: 100) points out that differences in conceptual frameworks are most often made visible at *rich points* (...) where languacultures come not just into contact - contact that is often conflictual - but where the person has the opportunity to develop new ways of perceiving, talking and thinking about reality. (...) My argument is that language proficiency in general, and advanced language proficiency in particular, entails the appropriation of conceptual meanings that emerge at rich points. (p. 79)

Later in the same chapter, Lantolf (2006) concludes that

[when] we move into the domain of languaculture, ultimate attainment is about much more than grammatical and phonological ability. It entails ‘acquiring the richness of the L2 system’s symbolic resources and a concern with learner ability to make acceptable choices ‘within the nexus of intended meaning, available resources, and privileged forms of expression as the L2 speech community has evolved them’ (Byrnes 2002, p. 45). (p. 87)

Fostering Concept-based Approaches and Intercultural Communicative Competence

The fundamental entailment in Lantolf’s position is that the process of teaching/learning a second language should first of all allow students to develop a deeper understanding of the similar or different ways in which their L1 and the L2 verbalize conceptual knowledge. In this view, teaching/learning a second language should go beyond the narrow focus on the lexicogrammar as a system that is essentially based on rules of thumb and sets of ready-made language chunks (e.g., consider the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993, 1997, 2000), which gained momentum in the 1990’s). In fact, as Lantolf and Poehner (2014) contend,

The two most important pedagogical framework derived from Vygotsky’s theory are Gal’perin’s (1992) *Systemic Theoretical Instruction* (STI) and Davydov’s (2008) *Developmental Instruction*. Beginning from Vygotsky’s contention that effective

developmental education entails presentation of well-organized conceptual knowledge of the object of study linked to concrete practices, both approaches propose ways of materializing conceptual knowledge so that it can be appropriated by learners and used to mediate their performance in goal-directed activity. (p. XIII)

As a corollary to the above, we may assume that such concept-based approaches should also foster a comparative perspective, whereby learners may gain insight into the dynamic interaction between the L1 and the L2 languacultural systems, and find their own voice in developing what Byram (1997) defined intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The emergence of learners' plurilingual and pluricultural identities are, therefore, the expected outcome of students' appropriation of the L1 and the L2, which are two symbolic social constructs that exist in a state of permanent flux and are adapted by each L2-learner/user to suit their communicative needs. Kramsch (2009), who draws on Vygotsky's (1978) SCT, sees this process as the development of the learner's

symbolic competence, an ability that is both theoretical and practical, and that emerges from the need to find appropriate subject positions within and across the languages at hand. (...) [T]he symbolic competence necessary to become a multilingual subject includes:

- an ability to understand the symbolic value of symbolic forms and the different cultural memories evoked by different symbolic systems;
- an ability to draw on the Semiotic diversity afforded by multiple languages to reframe ways of seeing familiar events, create alternative realities, and find an appropriate subject position 'between languages', so to speak.
- an ability to look both *at* and *through* language and to understand the challenges to the L2 economy and integrity of the subject that come from unitary ideologies and a totalizing networked culture. (pp. 200-201)

Finally, Kramsch (2009) concludes by saying that "for language learners, symbolic competence can open up multiple perspectives on historical and social realities and appropriately prepare them for today's multilingual world." (p. 201)

Incidentally, we should observe that this conceptualization of the second language learner as a plurilingual speaker who develops his/her plurilingual competence as part of the second language curriculum is also one of the main principles that inspire the latest edition of the Common European Framework (CEFR), the Companion Volume, published by the Council of Europe in 2020. In its early edition, the CEFR (2001) already introduced a key tenet of second language education concerning students' interaction. This was not simply considered the sum of receptive and productive skills, but rather the process of intertwining discourse through a negotiation of meaning. Later, the Companion Volume (2020) expanded on this concept, and indicated that

The plurilingual vision associated with the CEFR gives value to cultural and linguistic diversity at the level of the individual. It promotes the need for learners as 'social agents' to draw upon all of their linguistic and cultural resources and experiences in

order to fully participate in social and educational contexts, achieving mutual understanding, gaining access to knowledge and in turn further developing their linguistic and cultural repertoire. (p. 157)

Above all, one of the great achievements of the Companion Volume (2020) is that the idealized native-speaker competence is no more taken as the ultimate goal in second language education:

the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to ‘develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place’. (p. 157)

In concluding this section, I would like to point out that the goal of the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) to promote plurilingualism in language education is of pivotal significance, because it finally moves beyond the long sedimented ideology that prioritizes native-speakerism and the primacy of official standard languages. This is particularly important for what concerns ELT in the age of Globalization. Indeed, the plurilithic nature of English (Pennycook, 2009) and its unprecedented dimension as the primary world lingua franca (e. g., see Crystal, 1997, Jenkins, 2000, Seidlhofer, 2011, Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2012, Widdowson, 2013) have challenged the idea of English as a monolithic language that is immune to change, and whose legitimate owners are its native speakers. Today, the nature of English as a lingua franca (ELF) or, as Jenkins (2015) suggests, of English as a *multilingua* franca, is that of a variable, context-bound affordance that international interlocutors adopt and adapt cooperatively to fulfil their communicative needs. The impact of ELF on ELT is of course problematic in many ways, hence the real challenge today is to design a paradigm shift in second language education that could respond to the emergence of multicentric Englishes, as I am going to discuss in the next section.

Sociocultural Theory and ELF in the English Classroom

As I mentioned in the previous section, the development of second language teaching methodology is intrinsically connected to and depends on important historical, economic, social, scientific, technological and cultural changes. New methods and approaches have usually been the applied linguists’ achievements in their effort to draw from previous experience and from the most advanced linguistic theories, as well as from the most advanced technological devices, in order to cope with new requirements of performance. In this sense, innovations in second language pedagogy have normally been determined by new scenarios of interaction in a changing world. At the turn of the new century, this was made even more evident by the complex process of Globalization, which has radically transformed the international order that came out of World War II, and has given rise to complex, large-scale phenomena, like the integration of world markets and finance, international mass migration, new strategic alliances to face financial crisis and military conflicts, and last but not least, the tremendous impact of the digital revolution on human life. In this respect, the rise of English as the most widely spread lingua franca should be seen as a direct consequence of the growing

need for a shared contact language to mediate global communication. Hence, one of today's major educational challenges is to design a new pedagogical approach to English that may incorporate its plurilithic dimension and meet the urgent demand for up-to-date, effective ELT (Grazzi, 2018b).

Nevertheless, it seems that the development of an ELF-aware pedagogy has not yet become a priority for applied linguists, except for the circle of ELF scholars. Nor has ELF informed institutional curricula, notwithstanding some official documents, like the Council of Europe's Compendium Volume (2020), envisage adopting a plurilingual approach to second language teaching. Presumably, this is also due to the fact that teachers of English normally tend to resist this kind of paradigm shift in ELT (e.g. see Jenkins, 2007, Grazzi, 2018a, 2018c), and students normally take native-speaker competence as their learning objective (Grazzi, 2013). The subject English is still considered a second (ESL) or a foreign (EFL) language, the reference model of which is largely based on the standard English exonormative model. This may be true also in a Hallidayan perspective, whereby the learner's L1 still tends to be seen as a possible source of error. Matthiessen (2006) writes that

even advanced second language learners construe events in their second language based on the semantic system of their first language. The effects can be quite subtle and 'errors' can be hard to detect, but closer analysis reveals semiotic mediation of the first language. Once we can identify and interpret such effects on 'semantic style' in a second language through our Vygotskian/Whorfian/Hallidayan perspective, we are in a position to help advanced language learners develop their semantic resources in the language they are learning. (...) In learning a foreign language (...), a learner is also learning **through** the language and learning **about** the language. (p. 33) (Original emphases).

We may argue that the underpinning assumption in Matthiessen's words is that advanced language competence entails the learner's conformity to the 'foreign' lexicogrammar and languacultural systems, while it neglects the changes and adaptations that normally take place when the learner's L1 and English are in contact. On the contrary, ELF is an emergent, plurilingual and transcultural mediational tool that shows that deviations from the norm should not be automatically classified as 'errors', for they may be intended as legitimate adaptations that signify the interlocutors' different languacultural identities. A case in point may be the creative use of English in ELF discourse, a phenomenon called re-metaphorization of idioms (Pitzl, 2009, 2012, 2016), which expand the meaning potential of English through the use of new metaphors and loaded expressions. For instance, during an intercultural telecollaboration project with Italian and Finnish high-school learners (Grazzi, 2018b), an Italian student wrote: "I've done karate for eight years and this is the ninth one. It's a very beautiful activity which *allows me to get the stress off my chest* and be more calm, in a peaceful state of mind." (p. 149) (Emphasis added). Classifying this example of cross-cultural transfer as an 'error' seems to be totally inappropriate. Instead, this non-canonical expression instantiates the learner's development of symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009), as I mentioned in the previous section. As Widdowson (2015) eloquently points out,

With this radical change of the role and status of English in the contemporary world, questions also naturally arise as to the pedagogic relevance of approaches to linguistic description that have not taken this change into account, but still focus on native speaker forms. If it is ELF that represents the reality of English as used by most people in the world, then it would seem only reasonable to suppose (...) that the subject English should be designed to reflect this reality. (p. 228)

Discussion

I would like to observe that English, on a par with all natural languages, has always been subject to change, as the diachronic perspective on the history of this language clearly shows. However, if looked at synchronically, what appear to be unique features of the changes that are taking place nowadays is the rapidity of this process and, above all, the fact that it is happening on a global scale, where the main actors are L2 learners/users from diverse linguacultural backgrounds, drawn together by shared interests and pragmatic purposes. Nevertheless, what seems to be particularly problematic is how to bridge the gap between the dynamic reality of ELF - which is not an encoded variety of English, but rather a variable way of using it by non-native-speaker discourse communities - and the reality of the subject English, which is based on a more “stable and self-contained” (Widdowson 2015, p. 228) native-speaker linguacultural model. In the next and final section, I will try to reach a reasonable compromise between what seems to be a dichotomic choice between EFL and ELF, in second language education.

Conclusion

Learners’ ‘errors’, or deviations from encoded lexicogrammar norms, may be seen as the litmus test of the way we consider the changes taking place in English, in the age of Globalization. On the one hand, maintaining the EFL paradigm as the only acceptable model for the subject English reduces the possibility to raise teachers’ and learners’ awareness of today’s plurilingual and pluricultural dimension of English. On the other hand, incorporating ELF into the English curriculum presupposes a thorough reconceptualization of the subject English, whereby it would be necessary to define new criteria for syllabus designers, teacher educators, language teachers, test designers and L2 practitioners in general. In any case, it seems reasonable to say that if we believe that ELT should be connected to the world outside the classroom and to the process of change that English is undergoing nowadays, then approaching language variability with an open mind is a recommended and viable option.

My suggestion is that through SCT it is possible to find a convergence point between EFL and ELF, for they both conceive of language as a mediational tool to carry out social action. Especially when students are involved in authentic communication tasks (e.g., web-mediated telecollaboration projects (Grazzi, 2013, 2018b)) the L2-learner/user’s performance represents the dynamic synthesis of a) the educational teaching/learning process; b) the learner’s appropriation of English as a contact language; and c) the expression of his/her linguacultural identity.

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