

Learning08: Methodologies and Practices for Approaching Learning as a Social Phenomenon Inside and Outside of School

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Embracing the body in second language interaction and learning

In their landmark paper, Firth and Wagner (1996) called for an expansion of the traditional boundaries of the SLA field to include non-cognitivist perspectives on language learning and use, such as those being explored by researchers working within the frameworks of conversation analysis and socio-cultural theory. Over the past decade, this extended socio-interactive perspective has indeed gained substantial momentum among second language researchers. Yet, for the most part, language learners continue to be portrayed primarily as disembodied language producers and the deep connection between talk and body has yet to be fully appreciated within the second language learning community.

Learning as one form of social interaction is realized within a dynamically unfolding, multi-dimensional and multi-modal space and to understand fully the interactional dynamics from the participants' perspective, our analyses need to take into account not just talk but how talk-as-social-action is embedded within, and ultimately inseparable from, the physical dimensions of the interaction. While the use of videotaped data and assorted technical means of working with these materials are now common, gaps remain between the technology, the standard practices of transcription, and the analytic import and granularity of observations on body behaviors. For instance, while researchers have become accustomed to attending to the most minute subtleties of the talk, body behaviors are still regularly transcribed and analyzed at the coarser macro-level of so-called gestures, i.e. "participant raises hand."

This presentation will explore the ramifications for second language research of incorporating a deeper level of appreciation for the embodied aspects of second language interaction and learning. We will begin by considering the nature of embodied interaction and the ways that novice second language users rely on and deploy the resources of their co-present bodies. Next, we'll examine the challenges involved in observing and subsequently documenting the flow of multimodal interaction at an appropriate level of granularity. Finally, we'll explore several instances of multi-modal learning and how a fuller appreciation of "the body" on the part of both researchers and teachers might impact second language learning contexts.