

Intending Learning – A Variation Theoretical Perspective on the Teaching and Learning of the Progressive Aspect among English Language Learners

Abstract

The focus of this study is to explore how conditions can be created that will allow for the possibility of enhancing the teaching and learning of grammatical capabilities among secondary school English language learners. The method proposed is the school-based research approach known as Learning Study together with the theoretical framework of variation theory.

Research Aims

The overall aim of this study is to investigate and construct knowledge about the relationship between teaching and learning English. The nature of the knowledge is primarily content orientated and has two foci. One focus is the identification of critical aspects of the grammatical structure known as the progressive aspect, and furthermore, how discernment of the critical aspects through the use of variation theory can provide possibilities for enhanced learning. The other focus has a broader scope and is concerned with examining the implications of using Learning Study and a variation theoretical perspective in an instructional design for English language education.

Research Design

The method chosen to help answer the research questions is Learning Study, an educational development and practice research approach based on the Japanese Lesson Study model. The conceptual framework of Learning Study consists of two key elements, firstly the focus on the object of learning, in this study, the progressive aspect. Secondly is the underpinning of the variation theory of learning which posits that learning is being able to discern critical aspects of the object of learning, achieved through seeing and experiencing patterns of variation and invariance. Variation is thus a crucial and necessary condition if learning is to take place. Two Learning Studies will be carried out with three 6th grade classes by a team of four English teachers. This cyclical model requires co-dependency and will involve both the teachers and the researcher collaborating to plan, administer pre- and post-tests, record, implement, evaluate and analyze the series of lessons with variation theory as the theoretical foundation and starting point.

Knowledge Contribution

While much research into second language acquisition has concerned itself with cognitive and psychological processes, there is a lack of classroom-based research with the potential of contributing to effective language teaching and learning. This study will attempt to redress the imbalance by contributing to the field of classroom-based research and in particular, the knowledge base of English subject matter content as regards grammatical capabilities. By investigating how discernment of critical aspects of the progressive aspect can promote learning, and by analyzing the conditions, restrictions and opportunities surrounding the use of variation theory, this study will open up possibilities for increased student learning, improved educational results and informed instructional practices.

“Vary your language!” But what should actually vary in a well varied interaction?

Previous research in the field of teaching and learning interaction in foreign language learning have shown that communicative competence is made up of several parts. According to Canale (1980) it is made up of a grammatical competence, a strategic competence and a sociolinguistic competence. Mitchell & Myles (2004) have described empirical evidence that foreign language learners actually vary their language according to formality and according to gender if the learner is aware of the need to do this adaptation. Preston (1989) has also shown that foreign language speaking persons vary their language according to situation and interlocutor.

Communication has been described as early as by Mead in 1932 to basically be the construction of meaning in between two persons. One utterance is provided with meaning through the response it gets. A slightly more modern definition of what it means to be interacting well and what communication means is offered by Ellis (2012) when it is stated that learning shows when learners shift in internalization from an intermental to an intramental plane. Learning is not only evident in the correct/incorrect use of target language forms, but also in terms of assistance needed or independence in language usage.

Research question

My research question is “In what way or ways do different teaching designs affect pupils' possibilities of adapting their language to suit interlocutor and situation when they are orally interacting in English as a foreign language?”.

Research design

The theory of learning that is used in the outlining of the object of learning (the intended object of learning) is the activity theory (Lantolf, 2000). The variation theory (Marton & Booth, 1997) is used to analyse the object of learning and also to analyse the pupils' learning (the enacted and the lived object of learning). The learning studies that will be done will have the same indirect object of learning (the ability that the pupils should develop). That will be the ability to adapt language to suit interlocutor and situation while interacting orally in English as a foreign language. There will be different direct objects of learning, what the pupils actually studies, though. It could be vocabulary, fluency or formulaic sequences. The main interest is to do research on the quality of the ability to adapt language. What is it that you need to be good at to be able to adapt your language to suit interlocutor and situation?

Expected knowledge complement

One of the reasons that pupils find the subject English and its use in class hard and embarrassing might be that they have a view of it that does not really reflect what it actually is (Ahlquist, 2012). Many pupils seem to have a view of speaking English in school that is very formal, or at least their idea of what you are good at when you are good at speaking English comprise formal qualities such as fluency and native-like pronunciation. I think that my research and the outcomes of it may help to shed some new lights on what it means to interact well when speaking English.

When reading about foreign and second language research, you can see that so-called classroom based research (as opposed to research done either in isolated laboratory like settings, or on curricula, text books and such) is asked for (Williams, 2012). I think that my research will be very much in line with this description and, hopefully, develop the foreign language research as well as the learning study approach.

I know from own experience, and from discussions with colleagues too, that the teaching of oral interaction is considered tricky. You do not really know how to do it and it becomes awkward at times. This issue might also be

addressed in this research. It is my utmost hope that the research presented here will lead to positive outcomes for both pupils and teachers. If it also leads to a further methodological discussion concerning the learning study approach and its use it is even for the better.

- Ahlquist, S. I. (2012) *The impact of the Storyline Approach on the Young Language Learner Classroom: a Case Study in Sweden*. Kristianstad. Kristianstad University, Department of English.
- Canale, M. (1980). Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing, *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1) p.1-47.
- Ellis, R. (2012). *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lantolf, J.P. (2000). "Introducing sociocultural theory" In: J.P. Lantolf (Ed.) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marton, F. & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and awareness*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Mead, G.H. (1932). *Mind, Self & Society. From the standpoints of a social behaviorist*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, R. & Myles, F. (2004). *Second Language Learning Theories. Second Edition*. London, Arnold.
- Preston, D. R. (1989). *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Williams, J. (2012). "Classroom research". In: S.M. Gass & A Mackey (Eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge. (p. 541-554).