

LANGUAGING ABOUT LANGUAGE AS A FORM OF STRETCHING ONE'S INTERLANGUAGE AND DEVELOPING AGENCY

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Abstract

This paper will demonstrate how the perspective of approaching the teaching-learning of a foreign language through languaging – the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language itself along with reflection about it (Swain, 2006, in press) – a concept which finds support in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), seems to be a good option to be used with advanced students of English as a foreign language as a means of developing their interlanguage and their agency. Data from collaborative dialogue, individual and in pairs (Vidal, 2003), show evidence that by languaging about language learners construct, reconstruct, co-construct their interlanguage stretching their linguistic repertoire and that speaking and writing go beyond the mere transmission of a message but serve as tools of the mind. The approach seems to serve interlanguage development in respect to linguistic precision as well as in respect to the exercise of learners' autonomy.

Key words: interaction, comprehensible output, languaging, sociocultural theory, interlanguage stretching, agency

Resumo

Este ensaio vai demonstrar como a perspectiva de se abordar o ensino-aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira através de lingualização – processo de se construir significado e moldar conhecimento e experiência através de produção lingüística na própria língua-alvo com reflexão sobre seu uso (Swain, 2006, no prelo) – conceito que encontra apoio em teoria sociocultural da aprendizagem (Vygotsky, 1978), parece uma boa opção para ser utilizado com alunos adiantados de inglês como língua estrangeira como uma forma de promover o desenvolvimento de sua interlíngua e de sua agentividade. Dados oriundos de diálogos colaborativos, individuais e em pares (Vidal, 2003), fornecem evidências para se acreditar que lingualizando sobre língua aprendizes constroem, reconstroem, co-constroem sua interlíngua estendendo o seu repertório lingüístico e que falar e escrever vão além de mera transmissão de uma mensagem, mas servem de ferramentas da mente. A abordagem favorece o desenvolvimento da interlíngua no que se refere à precisão lingüística assim como no que se refere ao exercício da autonomia do aprendiz.

Palavras-chave: interação, produção compreensível, lingualização, teoria sociocultural, esticamento da interlíngua, agentividade

1. Introdução

The teaching of a second and/or a foreign language (L2) is a field that is constantly in a state of change. As regards, for example, language teaching and learning methodologies, in the last decade or so, we have been faced with what has been being called the post-methods era (Richards and Rodgers, 2001) – the result of a search for the most effective ways of teaching-learning an L2, a reflection of a pedagogy which goes beyond the simple application of a brand-name method or approach. This trend, which also finds followers in Brazil, explores the nature of effective classroom teaching and learning taking into consideration, among other things, the whole context of language teaching, teachers' and learners' beliefs and strategies, as well as the process of L2 acquisition itself in order to, together with the support of results from empirical research, suggest judicious choices for pedagogical practice.

Taking this scenario into account, it seems undeniable, however, that some form of communicative language teaching (CLT) will be favored in the language classroom and, in such a context, the concept of interaction plays a significant role, turning out to be an important aspect of the research agenda of the field of second language acquisition (SLA). From a Vygotskian sociocultural theory of mind perspective, learning occurs in interaction, not as a result of it (Donato, 1994, 2000; Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Swain, 2000, 2006, in press) because, for Vygotsky (1978), the development and functioning of all higher mental processes are mediated, and language is the most important mediating tool of the mind. It is through interaction with the other (interpersonal) as well as through interaction with the self (intrapersonal) that an individual is going to “shape and reshape cognition” (Swain, 2006, in press), making also such a process, via speaking and/or writing, visible and possible to be scrutinized. Such an understanding of how learning takes place will most likely recommend the application of a form-focused instruction approach, a type of intervention that focus on the formal aspects of the target language within communicative contexts and which finds support from research in the field of SLA (Norris and Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2001).

In this paper, I will show some extracts from verbal protocols produced by advanced Brazilian learners of EFL when engaged in negotiated interaction. The data provide further evidence for the claim that speaking and writing go beyond mere message communication. They serve as tools of the mind and are source of learning. The theoretical framework is mainly based on the comprehensible output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) because it has straight ties with sociocultural theory. Swain herself (Swain, 2000; Swain and Lapkin, 2002) has recently reinterpreted the hypothesis in the light of sociocultural principles reconsidering the former interpretation which had associated it with an information-processing theory of learning. In the evolution of her theoretical orientation, Swain (2006, in press) proposes a new concept – that of “*linguaging*” – to substitute for what is supposed to be understood by “*production*” as will be explained below. However, before *linguaging*, other terms/concepts had already been used under a sociocultural frame of reference to replace “*output*”: both “*collaborative dialogue*” as well as “*verbalization*” were used in place of “*output*” to demonstrate the important role of production in the acquisition¹ of an L2.

¹ The terms acquisition and learning are used interchangeably without the implications of the Krashenian interpretation.

2. Theoretical framework

For a long time, the comprehensible output hypothesis was linked with an information-processing model, under which the communication of a message was the prime concern. But by “comprehensible output” it should be understood: “Output that extends the linguistic repertoire of the learner as he or she attempts to create precisely and appropriately the meaning desired (Swain, 1985: 252). Consequently, such a production has never simply implied comprehension, understanding of a message only, but production that was precise, appropriate, and coherent after the learner had been led to it, which was also referred to as “pushed output”. In fact, the concept of comprehensible output seems to find better support in sociocultural theory because since the very beginning the role of output was

at minimum, to provide opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use, to test out hypothesis about the target language, and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it (Swain, 1985: 252),

making clear the commitment to the interpretation of language both as a communicative activity and a cognitive tool.

I believe that the term “comprehensible” might have led to a misinterpretation of the concept, due to the influence of its forerunner “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1982). The latter really had close link with comprehension, understanding. It might have been also due to this that the Canadian researcher kept trying, in her long years of research and theoretical reflection, to find a term which could with greater precision express what she meant by “output”.

In the mid 90s, Swain herself asserted that her work evolved very much and that she “moved from interpreting output solely within an information-processing framework of learning to viewing output within a sociocultural perspective of learning” (Swain and Lapkin, 2002: 285). It was then that she recommended collaborative dialogue as a form of language learning. Under this perspective, the learning of a foreign language results from production realized by means of language as dialogue – dialogue with the others and dialogue with the self, dialogue which serves communicative and cognitive functions. This dialogue was called collaborative – “dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building” (Swain, 2000: 102). While learners interact and/or jointly produce language with conscious attention to their production they are capable of concentrating on this

production and of solving their linguistic problems and, consequently, are led to produce language that is more precise and appropriate. By the same token, it is not simply production per se, but it is the collaborative dialogue that seems vital to the learning of an L2.

Also, and at the same time, “verbalization” – the process of expressing in words thoughts, ideas and feelings – was used. But both verbalization and collaborative, could be subject to misinterpretation: verbalization, as if only including speaking, when in fact it includes both speaking and writing; and collaborative, making one believe a partner would always be involved, even though it includes both auto-dialogue and dialogue with the other.

Therefore, more recently still (2005), Swain not totally pleased with the terms collaborative and/or verbalization introduces a new one to replace output, and this new term is “linguaging”. According to the researcher herself,

Linguaging [...] refers to the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. It is part of what constitutes learning. Linguaging about language is one of the ways we learn language. (Swain, 2006: 151, in press)

In other words, linguaging would be the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through production in the target-language along with reflection about it. In this manner, linguaging about language is one of the means to learn a language and to stretch one’s interlanguage, the language of the learner. The new term shows the importance of the role of interaction and more specifically of production as a way of language learning since it reflects much better the understanding that language is a cognitive tool that mediates the acquisition of language itself. And Swain goes further:

The term "linguaging" emphasizes language as an action, not a thing. As a thing, language is static and linguists treat it as an object separate from human beings. As an action, language is an integral aspect of our thinking, meaning-making selves. Linguaging is how we regulate our social and emotional and cognitive behaviour as well as that of others. Linguaging is what it is that we do to transform our thoughts into a shareable resource - shareable with ourselves and others. Linguaging, I will argue, is one of the ways we become advanced language learners. Agency, a socially mediated act, may facilitate or hinder the process of becoming advanced language learners. Collaborative settings are where agency and linguaging are most visible; but they can also be observed in settings where individuals are alone. (Swain, 2005, abstract for the NALDIC conference)

Swain (2006, in press) does not define agency formally, but agency has to do with the exercise of one's autonomy as a learner who behaves according to his "mediational tools" and sociocultural parameters.

In view of the foregoing, I say with confidence that there was not a revision of the concept of comprehensible output, but a simply an evolution, an upgrade, which really seems to explain better the hypothesis put forward in 1985 making it more visible to scholars interested in the field of SLA studies.

3. Análise dos dados

Some excerpts from collaborative dialogues of advanced Brazilian EFL learners, Portuguese-English majors from a university in the southeastern of Brazil, will illustrate what was discussed above. They first worked alone and then together to produce and evaluate a written text in view of consciousness-raising communicative tasks (Vidal, 2004).² They were supposed to identify production problems and try to solve them by themselves or jointly. Verbal protocols were used as a methodological procedure: firstly in the form of individual think-alouds, they produced individual dialogues; and secondly, in the form of interaction in dyads, they produced collaborative dialogues in pairs. They did not have any other source of feedback. Dictionaries, pedagogical grammars and not even teacher feedback were allowed.

In the episodes below, there is a problem which was not solved in the think-aloud but resolved when the students worked together. In Episode 1, S5 (=Student 5) did not recall how to say "cabine telefônica" in English. In fact, the noun phrase was in the input, but S5 had not noticed it. In this case, the dialogue with the self was not enough to make S5 remember the word focus of her concern neither did it help her perceive that the noun phrase was in the text in front of her. Only after the dialogue with her pair (Episode 2) was she able to notice that "telephone box" was in the input, making her laugh at her lack of attention. By languaging about language collaboratively S5 and S6 arrived at an appropriate solution which was incorporated in S5 written text.

Episode 1: TA (Think-aloud), S5, line 15-18; 28-30

Bob, what happened? como é que é cabine de telefone? On the telephone x x on the telephone a tree fell down on the telephone cabine de telefone meu Deus a tree fell down on the telephone xx

² By task was meant: any structured language learning endeavour [...] (Breen, 1987: 27) which involves learners in "[...] comprehending, manipulating, producing, and/or interacting in the target language while their attention is *principally* [but not *exclusively*] focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1998: 10, emphasis mine).

on the telephone. xx are you hurt? ...[...] . Acho que tá bom, mas ficaria melhor se eu escrevesse cabine de telefone, mas eu não sei. Telephone olha não sei então primeiro eu decidi ele ficou preso ele ia sai xxx acho que está bom.....

Episode 2: PW (Pair Work), S5-S6, turn 001-028

001 F5: Hum.....

002 F6: You first?

003 F5: Hum..... so, you wrote the telephone box [laughter] which [laughter] I was thinking about it I didn't noticed it I could find it but it was in the text

004 F6: Yes

005 F5: I didn't pay attention but hum I didn't write *cabine telefônica* because I didn't know it so no no mistakes and what else

[...]

019 F5: Hum this is the part I should rewrite, because I would I will write the telephone box [laughter]

020 F6: I used the word here on the text but you didn't find

021 F5: Ok you're right

025 F5: I think it's ok if you if you

026 F6: Rewrite the word telephone box

027 F5: It would be more specific the tree falls down on the telephone. It would be better on the telephone box

028 F6: OK [...]

Written Text:

Susan: Bob? What happened? Bob? Where are you?

Bob: Susan, a tree fell down on the telephone box!

Susan: Are you hurt?

Similarly, in the episode below, S2 did not remember or did not know how to say “concurso de poesia” in English. Her previous knowledge was telling her that “championships”, the word that came immediately to her mind, was related to sports. By languaging about language S1 and S2 were able to scaffold each other and arrive at an appropriate solution which was incorporated in S2 written text. In turns 81 (“Don't change because I am saying so”) and 82 (“No, because she [referring to the researcher] said we have to do so and I agree with you and I I I didn't know the right word”) they express their power of decision, their agency.

Episode 3: TA, S2, line 19-23

“Hum when I was a kid I used to take part hum uh? O mesmo xxx to take part in poetry championships. Eu não sei se a palavra é essa eu não sei se championships é só para esporte.....não sei uh.....When I.....I deixa eu ver o que eu vou escrever..... championships at school.....”

Episode 4: PW, S1-S2, turn 059-083

059 M1: Humhum, “When I was a kid I used to take part in poetry championships” [reading text]

060 F2: Is poetry championships?

061 M1: Uh?

062 F2: Is the word championships? It seems to me it is so connected with xx

063 M1: Championships, poetry

064 F2: Competitions

065 M1: Cham-championships [laughter] poetry championships

066 F2: No it is competitions

067 M1: I don't know hum, contests, poetry contests.

068 F2: Hum, I've never heard this this yes?

069 M1: Contests? I think contests is best for

070 F2: So is

071 M1: It's the same thing, a contest and a and a championship.

072 F2: Ok x here championships

073 M1: I mean in Portuguese it is the same thing

074 F2: Ok
 075 M1: Like I would see hum
 076 F2: Is like this contest?
 077 M1: Like a competition.
 078 F2: Is it like this, contest?
 079 M1: Contest, yea.
 080 F2: Ok.
 081 M1: xx Don't change because I am saying so
 082 F2: No, because she [referring to the researcher] said we have to do so and I agree with you and I I I didn't know the right word
 083 M1: Hum, ok.

Written Text: When I was a kid I used to take part in poetry contests at school.

The examples above show that the work in pairs helped the solution of the linguistic problem in focus, but there are occasions it does not. In the episodes below, S9 was in doubt between “in trouble” and “with trouble(s)”. Maybe S9 was transferring *com problema(s)* from Portuguese. Making use of her intuition she made the right choice – “in trouble”. However, as she not sure about her decision, she questioned S10 about it. S10 suggested another possibility, “on trouble”, which was not correct. Since S10 was also insecure – “*Eu acho que é on trouble, isn't it?*”, S9 did not accept the suggestion and kept her initial choice making use of her autonomy as a learner.

Epidose 5:TA, T3, S9, line 3-4

Now er....now he's safe in the city but some years ago he was in trouble, in trouble. Não sei se é in trouble ou with troubles. Não, vou deixar 'in trouble' [...]

Episode 6:PW, T3, S9-S10, turn 005-009

005M9: Well, Tom is a language teacher who lives in London. Uh... I started, started using many words we had to do, we had to use, but then I found that as it was the present I had a problem, how, how do you say that he was in a /island/ if he lives in London? So, I , I created something *meio*, a little ‘trippy’ thing. [laughter] Now, he is safe in the city, but some years ago he was in trouble. Is it right?

006F10: *Eu acho que é on trouble, isn't it?* On trouble. I'm not very sure about this but I think it's on trouble.

007M9: On trouble? xxx

008F10: I don't know

009FM9: Oh! My god! OK, let it be.

Note: S9 did not agree with S10 and did not accept S10's suggestion.

Written Text: Now, he is safe in the city, but some years ago he was in trouble, living in a desert island, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Episodes 7 and 8 illustrate how learners can notice words or use of words after interacting by means of collaborative dialogue in pairs. The examples show evidence of cognitive processes that generate linguistic knowledge.

Episode 7: PW, S3-S4, turn 045-051

045 F3: Ok, it is a reference of time I didn't know this

046 M4: Whereas,

047 F3: Yea, I didn't know x this word yes

048 M4: Yes, while, I don't know if it is much used, it came to my mind
049 F3: Yes.
050 M4: Because I read a lot
051 F3: Hum

Episode 8: PW, S5-S6, turn 009

009 F5: I learned some words new to me. I didn't know that a person gives birth to another but it is correct and hum just this I didn't know this kind of structure to give birth to another but is is correct xx

To summarize, in the examples above, learners were stimulated to language about language. In doing so they realized that there were things about the target language that they did not know or about which they were unsure of. In view of this, they set about trying to solve the perceived problems using language as a tool to mediate their thinking. Languaging mediated the students' language learning by drawing the learners' attention to problems related to language use, and at the same time, by giving them the tools to reason with and through to solutions. What S1 and S2 as well as S3, S4, S5, S6, S9 and S10 did was, as proposed by Swain: first their language articulated and transformed their thinking into an object and as such it became available for further reflection; second, languaging was the means of that further reflection. Through languaging, these learners made up new meanings and understandings – that is, they learned in both ways, through and about language. As Vygotsky claims, “speaking and writing [...] do much more than convey a message. They serve as tools of the mind mediating the cognition and the re-cognition of experience and knowledge” (Swain, 2006: 163, in press).

Finally, I present another excerpt where learners talk about things that go beyond language per se. In this dialogue, they express their autonomy as learners in the preservation of their identities. The example illustrates that even activities that are more form-oriented can be broadly speaking very communicative and that by languaging about language learners can reveal themselves as thinking beings, and meaning makers.

Episode 9: PW, S7-S8, turn 006-023

006 F7: Well it could be but the vocabulary I used is not hum as yours. You you used a a vari- variety I do-
007 F8: Yea but I don't think you are x your first part I think was great like this hum hum the thing you you thought about as a language teacher he could never be far from hundreds of books and smart clothes in for those long press conferences so you used xx also a variety of verbs I mean I think it's very creative the the father hum missing him and sending boats to him
008 F7: xx
009 F8: Very x
010 F7: xxx
011 F8: Yea, the point is I always I first of all I I thought of the story really the story **but** when I started writing I think that I tend not always but I think hum when I write a story I write too much so hum

the first part I mean the first paragraph was long and then hum you know I have x I have still a lot to talk to write about so that's why it's so long.

012 F7: But that's good.

013 F8: I think it should be shorter a little bit.

014 F7: But but

015 F8: I don't know

016 F7: The parts you talked about are necessary they are not hum repetitive you know rising intonation but not really a question

017 F8: Yea, you know that's that's that's why I write too much I mean write a story because I don't think it will be clear I mean

018 F7: Ok.

019 F8: Hum and I'm not like you very creative I just é if he gave me something to do it I can't think I couldn't even imagine a situation like **you** imagined his father and you used hum verbs in the present simple and xxx I could never write I would never think of that xx

020 F7: I liked your story very much it's it's logical you know

021 F8: [laughter] Yes, nece- necess- necessary to but but

022 F7: but it's good it's nice you story hum hum what I can realize in your story is that everything hum works right hum I mean hum by words you know when you read you you you don't stop suddenly and don't understand something you explain it very well

023 F8: Yea that's that's why [laughter] I you know I write too much I try to explain everything in I think that's how my mind works it works like this hum

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate that form-focused instruction via languaging seems to be a good option to be used with advanced students of English as a foreign language as a means of developing their interlanguage and their agency. Moreover, from a more theoretical perspective, it also intended to highlight the role of interaction in language learning and briefly explain the evolution of the concept of comprehensible output through the lens of a sociocultural theory of the mind.

In the light of such an understanding of how languages are learned – via production, pushed output, collaborative dialogue, verbalization, or in the final analysis, via languaging – I recognize focus on form to be a very profitable approach to an L2/LE and at the centre of language programs that set among their aims the development of “a sense of citizenship, critical awareness in relation to language [...] and the possibility of using language learning as a means of understanding at school the multiple ways of living the human experience” (PCN, 1998 translation mine).

Data from collaborative dialogues, individual and/or in pairs, show evidence that by languaging about language learners construct, reconstruct, co-construct their interlanguage stretching their linguistic repertoire and that speaking and writing go beyond the mere transmission of a message but serve as tools of the mind. The approach seems to serve interlanguage development in respect to linguistic precision as well as in respect to the exercise of learners' autonomy.

It seems worth adding, however, that in the study that was conducted (Vidal, 2003) there was not any delayed post-test which could confirm if the gains from the negotiated interaction would be maintained. Nevertheless, studies developed in Canada (Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Swain and Lapkin, 2002; Tocalli-Beller e Swain, 2006, in press) point to this positively. Therefore, it seems promising that form-focused instruction which favors activities that give learners, at least advanced ones, the opportunity to language about language may serve language learning and interlanguage stretching, aspiration of any advanced language learner from all over the world.

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