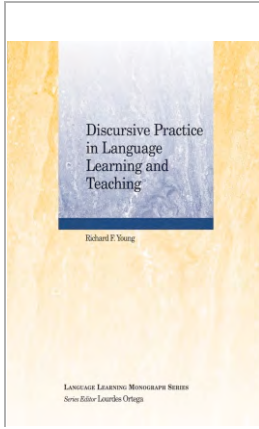


Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching

| Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching | | |
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| Author: | Richard F. Young (2009) | |
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Recently, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has seen the growing impact of social context on second language learning, which has been called by Block a “social turn” (2003). This increasing interest in social context and SLA has resulted in a need to theorize two notions, “social” and “context,” which have been defined differently across language-related fields. Similarly, the concept of “discursive practice” has started to appear more. Yet, despite its frequent use, this latter term has not been explored in detail. *Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching*, the sixth volume in the Language Learning monograph series, fills this gap by unpacking and analyzing these key concepts. According to Lourdes Ortega, the series editor, Young, a scholar at the center of research on context and SLA, presents “a highly personal, deeply synthetic, and remarkably organic treatment of the social context of additional language learning” (p. vii) and attempts to map out an approach to second language learning theory that has implications for second language teaching and testing. In this book Young significantly expands the scope of SLA by introducing *practice theory* to the field. While he covers both written and spoken discourse, the latter is more dominant.

What do we really mean by context and practice, then? Young provides detailed definitions of these two terms in his initial chapters. He uses practice theory as an overarching term, with origins in social theory and anthropology, and asks three vital questions a curious reader might ask: How does a practice approach parallel or diverge from related theoretical stances, what is a practice, and what does a practice approach seek to explain? He attempts to ground answers to

these questions through an analysis of an actual practice. The transcript he analyzes represents a conversation that took place among three workers in the reception area of a public building in central London in 2004.

The chapters that follow are based on an important argument centering on whether to begin investigating talk-in-interaction with talk or to start with the context-of-talk. Crucial arguments of this scope, raised through Young's sophisticated and objective questions, can be found in almost every chapter. In the third chapter, Young highlights three challenges that analysts of discursive practice face: How to describe and analyze the context of talk-in-interaction, how to describe and analyze the talk itself, and how to unite the two aspects of practice into a coherent theory of discursive practice. To answer these questions the author reviews four different approaches scholars have used to investigate the connection between context and L2 development. The utility of discursive practice is the focus of chapter five; here he asks: What's learned, whose learning, and whose participation? Young concludes that learning is portable, that is, through participation a learner uses verbal, nonverbal and interactional material previously learned through use in context, and applies such knowledge to further practice in later, different contexts.

I believe that the greatest challenge for a theory lies in its applicability. In chapter six Young meets this challenge by focusing on teaching and testing and convinces the reader that such applications support his practice theory. The uses he puts his theory to are to the point and seem doable; yet, each instructor would have to confirm they really work well by applying them with her or his own students.

Perhaps the major strength of this book is the author's comprehensive synthesis in almost every chapter of the most relevant notable studies, which is extremely useful. When introducing a term, concept or theory, he names its key developers and then concisely reviews the related literature. Rather than a simple summary, his review successfully builds on a critical synthesis, including major debates. For example, while introducing the term "context of situation" (chapter two), Young addresses Malinowski (1923), Firth (1935, 1957), Mitchell (1957, 1975), and Hymes (1974), all of whom contributed to incorporating the 'where', 'when', 'who' and 'why' of 'context of situation' into a developed theory of language. The author then applies—and critiques—such theory relative to the data he has gathered from sources such as (1) "self stories" (p. 69); (2) transcripts of spoken English (mostly dialogues), for example., a conversation between a Colombian migrant and his British workmates (chapter two); and narratives, for example, an extract from an interview with a foreign correspondent just returned from Iraq, conducted by the host of the radio program "Fresh Air" (chapter four). Analyses of these data samples are highly stimulating and engaging.

I found Young's explanatory method particularly helpful. For example, in chapter three, while talking about the role of emotion in a learning context, he introduces one of the studies he conducted with Garrett (2009) and explains in detail the coding system they used, which is

supported with a table. This step-by-step explanation of open, axial and selective coding processes might be very useful, especially for graduate students.

Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching provides new ideas about SLA, a useful critique of the related research, and an extensive bibliography of over 200 sources—and in the process is highly readable. Young's synthesis of knowledge about language, interaction and action has its roots in a wide range of fields: semiotics, philosophy, linguistic anthropology, sociology and ethnography. As such, students from all those fields might benefit from at least parts of his book. Practicing language teachers should benefit from its numerous concrete pedagogical applications. This book should remain influential in the field for a long time as a strong contribution to the role of context in SLA theory.

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