

# Divergent Philosophical Orientations Underpinning SLA Research

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Disagreement among SLA experts, which frustrates second language (L2) practitioners, may appear to pertain solely to the way they conceive of language and language learning, but it also stems from the divergent epistemic commitments and paradigmatic orientations undergirding SLA researchers' approach to the researched. Hence, understanding this epistemic and paradigmatic divergence impacting the realm of SLA is a prerequisite for the better understanding of current dynamics in the research that informs the actual practice of L2 teaching. This paper examines three research studies from SLA literature (Izumi, 2002; Norton, 1995; Willett, 1995) which are framed or informed by different epistemological orientations, and it demonstrates how these orientations impact the research design and thereby the conceptualization of second language learning. It is built upon the argument that the consumers of SLA research ought to be cognizant of the divergent epistemic commitments leading the field.

Second language acquisition<sup>1</sup> (SLA) and second language (L2) teaching have grown as two fields which have inevitably intertwined bodies of research as they exponentially expand. On one side of the equation, SLA researchers and theoreticians try to formulate the scope of inquiry and goals of SLA in relation to L2 teaching. On the other side, L2 researchers and methodologists assess the role and effectiveness of SLA research *in forming* and *informing* pedagogical implementations. As Ellis (2010) observes, "SLA originated in the felt need of a number of teachers-cum-researchers to understand how learners learn a L2 in both untutored and tutored settings" so that those experiences that were found facilitative of learning could be better incorporated into the actual practice of language teaching (p. 2). Therefore, from the very outset there existed a "close connection between theory and research in SLA and language pedagogy," yet SLA constitutes an applied field at heart rather than being a purely theoretical discipline under the umbrella of formal linguistics (p. 2). However, the relationship between SLA research and L2 teaching is not straightforward for the practitioners of the field, that is, teachers in actual classrooms. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) elucidate, "researchers and educators who are hoping for language acquisition theories that give them insight into language teaching practice are often frustrated by the lack of agreement among the experts" in the field of SLA (p. 49). Even though on the surface this disagreement seems to pertain solely to the way these experts conceive of language and language learning, it also stems from the

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<sup>1</sup> Having been influenced by the distinction posited by Krashen (1985), earlier SLA research conceived of acquisition and learning as completely different processes, yet in this paper they are used interchangeably.

divergent epistemic commitments and paradigmatic orientations undergirding SLA researchers' approach to the researched. Hence, understanding this epistemic and paradigmatic divergence impacting the realm of SLA is a prerequisite for the better understanding of current dynamics in the research that informs the actual practice of L2 teaching.

Scholars studying the research foundations of SLA direct attention to the tension between the two principal ontological orientations leading the field, namely, positivism and relativism<sup>2</sup>. This tension has a considerable influence upon the debate between cognitive and sociocultural approaches to SLA research. Traditional cognitivist SLA research which focuses on "the individual's mind as the locus of acquisition" (Lafford, 2007, p. 737) is largely informed by positivist ontology, whereas the socioculturalist SLA research which conceives of L2 learning "as essentially a social enterprise" relying on the co-construction of meaning by interlocutors is to a considerable degree fused with relativism (Lafford, 2007, p. 737). That is, the tensions between the two opposing conceptualizations of L2 learning process reflect an ontological disparity.

The socioculturalist stance that was granted a rather marginal and subsidiary position in the field compared to the cognitivist perspective has attained a great acknowledgment during the last few years. Firth and Wagner's (1997) seminal work voiced a clarion call for a reconceptualization in language learning that has proved to be the principal trigger of the relativist, socioculturalist opposition to positivist, cognitivist authority in the realm of SLA. This call for reconceptualization was harshly responded to by criticism from the opposite camp (Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997; Long, 1997; Poullisse, 1997). It was also followed by a huge amount of research based on the sociocultural theory of language learning (Cumming & Nassaji, 2000; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; DiCamilla & Antón, 2004; Gibbons, 2003; Huong, 2007; Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Poehner, 2009; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Yoshida, 2008a; Yoshida, 2008b). This burgeoning research helped to make the sociocultural approach a major alternative component of SLA (Freeman, 2007; Lantolf & Johnson, 2007; Swain & Deters, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). For instance, after underscoring the significant role of the epistemological disparity in the field which began with the emergence of alternative approaches competing against the cognitivist SLA mainstream, Ortega (2005) maintains that "the paradigm landscape within SLA has changed so much and become so complex in the last few years that a dichotomous mainstream-margin characterization of the discipline will soon no longer be tenable" (p.323). Furthermore, Zuengler and Miller (2006) suggest that cognitive and sociocultural orientations constitute two mainstream SLA worlds. In the same vein, Swain and Deters (2007) describe the current position of sociocultural perspective as a novel, "expanded and enriched" mainstream SLA theory (p. 820).

The field of SLA as described above indicates that it is experiencing a never-ending ontological and theoretical tension. Given this picture, three pieces of

<sup>2</sup> In positivist doctrine, "objects in the world have meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them [and] scientists are required to keep the distinction between objective, empirically verifiable knowledge and subjective, unverifiable knowledge very much in mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 27). From a relativist viewpoint, "Reality is a social, and, therefore, multiple, construction. . . . there is no tangible, fragmentable reality on to which science can converge" and researchers seek for "patterns, working hypotheses, or temporary, time-and-place-bound knowledge" (Block, 1996, p. 69).

research representing varying epistemological, paradigmatic and methodological commitments in SLA research will be analyzed and discussed in order to provide a foundation from which to understand the nature of SLA. For each study, the philosophical orientation<sup>3</sup>, methodology, and findings will be discussed. Furthermore, the research will be synthesized in the light of the role and the content of SLA courses offered for prospective L2 teachers, particularly what can enhance the effectiveness of courses in supplying future language teachers with facilitative tools for actual language teaching.

Izumi's (2002) "Output, Input Enhancement, and the Noticing Hypothesis," Willett's (1995) "Becoming First Graders in an L2: An Ethnographic Study of L2 Socialization" and Norton's (1995) "Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning" are significant studies selected as examples that examine the complexities in L2 learning processes from different angles and reflect the aforementioned disparities in the realm of SLA. These three studies represent different epistemologies but also diverge from them in various ways. Therefore the discussion of the ways each study manifests an epistemology and deviates from it will yield a clearer understanding of the epistemology itself. Moreover, teasing apart the epistemologies and methodologies undergirding these seminal pieces of scholarship will open venues to attend to how researchers' epistemological and methodological stance can impact the way they view or conceptualize L2 learning. It should be noted here that since epistemological orientation in the conceptual framework of a study does not always represent the investigator's epistemic leanings, a close look at the methodology of the inquiry is necessary for full understanding of the researcher's views on how researching relates to the researched. The main argument of this paper is that these scholars vary in their epistemic commitments, which shape their choice of methodologies and are highly pertinent to their conception of SLA. The current paper also contends that this variation might impact prospective or practicing L2 teachers' pedagogical decisions should they become exposed to inquiries into SLA.

### **Output, Input Enhancement, and the Noticing Hypothesis**

Izumi (2002) investigates the effect of output and visual input enhancement upon how adult English as a second language (ESL) learners acquire relativization in English. Izumi attends to two questions:

- (a) whether the act of producing output promotes noticing of formal elements in the target language input and affects subsequent learning of the form; and (b) whether such output-induced noticing and learning, if any, would be the same as that effected by visual input enhancement designed to draw learners' attention to problematic form features in the input. (p. 541)

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, epistemology and theoretical perspective constitute a philosophical orientation whose impact on methodology is in evidence, although Crotty (1998) distinguishes between them, defining the former as "the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" and the latter as the "philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria" (p.3).

These questions are analyzed through an experimental design which included a variety of requirements of output and exposure to enhanced input.

Izumi (2002) revisits three major issues that have interested cognitivist SLA scholars for years: comprehensible input, output production, and attention and noticing. Izumi stresses the need to reconsider the role and nature of input in language learning. He directs attention to the insufficiency of Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis which posits that "language is acquired via exposure to comprehensible-input, that is linguistic input which is finely tuned so that it is either at or just beyond the speaker/hearer's current state of linguistic development" (Block, 2003, p. 20). Izumi (2002) states that current research "seeks to obtain a more precise understanding of how learners process, or interact with, input to develop their interlanguage (IL) competence" (p. 542). Thus, the issues regarding how to draw L2 learners' attention to the target form or how to have them notice the form have become a major part of the SLA scholars' research agenda. Izumi underscores the importance of the two strategies (which offer pedagogical implications): visual input enhancement and learners' output. The former refers to the ways utilized to implicitly attract learners' attention to target form in the written language input and the latter denotes the product of language learning, the essential way to practice for fluency in the target language (Izumi, 2002). The commonality between them is the "attempt to direct the learner's otherwise elusive attention to problematic aspects in the input to promote their acquisition" (Izumi, 2002, p. 543). However, there exists a gap in the relevant literature since input enhancement and learners' output have not been put under scrutiny or tested together in one study. For this reason, benefitting from an experimental design as the methodology, Izumi intends to further our understanding of input-output relationship by scrutinizing the extent to which these two strategies, independently or in combination, contribute to learners' noticing and learning of a grammatical form in a target language.

### Post-Positivist Paradigm

Izumi's (2002) approach to the relationship between researcher and researched is compatible with the tenets of the post-positivist paradigm<sup>4</sup>. Ontologically, the post-positivist paradigm departs from the realist<sup>5</sup> stance and is more aligned with critical realism, which posits that there exists a real world regulated by real natural causes, but humans' "imperfect sensory and intellectual mechanisms" are not capable of truly perceiving it (Guba, 1990, p. 20). Researchers cannot be sure

<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper (1957, 1959, 1963, 1972), Thomas Kuhn (1970, 1977), and Paul Feyerabend (1987, 1991, 1993) are the prominent scholars who argued for a modified rendition of positivism by critiquing such fundamental tenets of positivism as objective existence of value-neutral, ahistorical and cross-culturally meaningful reality. Post-positivists "admit that, no matter how faithfully the scientist adheres to scientific method, research outcomes are neither totally objective nor unquestionably certain [and] ... the absoluteness has gone and claims of validity are tentative and qualified" (Crotty, 1998, p. 40).

<sup>5</sup> Realism "ascribes objective existence to various objects and properties, such as the external world, mathematical objects, universals, theoretical entities, causal relations, moral and aesthetic properties, and other minds" (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 590).

that their studies have uncovered the ultimate truth, but the reality is certainly out there. Epistemologically, post-positivism finds absurd the assumption that during the process of inquiry, the inquirer can put aside his humanness and approach the inquired objectively (Guba, 1990). Thus, it avoids claims of certainty and absolute objectivity or verifiable truth and draws more attention to probability and a certain level of objectivity. It seeks for ways to come close to the truth instead of hoping to hold it in its totality (Crotty, 1998). Thus, knowledge is deemed as conjectural and provisional from this perspective. To support these conjectures, researchers present data which are always subject to reconsideration (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). If we find the conjecture or claim interesting and it seizes our attention, using Dewey's (1938) terms, we need to inspect "the warrant" for it, that is, we need to check if the conjecture in question relies on the "beliefs that are strongly enough supported to be confidently acted on" (Phillips & Burbules, 2000, p. 3). If it proves strong, we accept the claim, but we ought to bear in mind that the warrant might be withdrawn or modified by succeeding research (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Besides, inquirers must check the consistency of their inquiries with the scholarly tradition in the field and must subject them to the scholars' judgment in the critical community to ask for sanction (Guba, 1990). In the same vein, while depicting the principal notions of post-positivism, Crotty (1998) places intense emphasis on the central role of the scientist's subscribed community in determining the acceptability of evidence, the criteria and methods to be used, the form of a theory, and so forth.

Izumi's (2002) study is aligned with the premises of post-positivism laid out above. For instance, his approach to the previous studies exploring the relationship between language input and output evinces that he sees them as conjectures to be revised and reconsidered. Some of these studies already underwent revision through other inquiries following them, and his own inquiry also sheds light on some previous studies. To illustrate, the notion of comprehensible input, which was first postulated by Krashen (1985), was reconsidered or reexamined by subsequent studies which showed comprehensible input to be necessary but insufficient. Then, other research directed focus on the necessity of attention for learning to occur, but still there exists a disagreement about the amount and type of attention needed for learners' acquisition (Izumi, 2002). In his research, Izumi sets out to gain insight into the two strategies employed to promote noticing of the grammatical form in the target language. Also, after reviewing the previous research, he specifies implications for further research. His study takes these implications into consideration and puts under scrutiny his phenomenon of interest relying on earlier inquiries. Moreover, after having presented his research, Izumi (2002) detects the remaining issues that require further investigation. These issues all closely pertain to visual input enhancement and learners' production of output, and it is likely that they yield evidence which may contradict Izumi's evidence and necessitate some alteration in its current warrants.

### **Methodological Approach: Controlled Experimental Design**

The methodological approach of Izumi's (2002) study is in line with his paradigmatic stance. He utilizes a controlled experimental design to investigate

the issues regarding learners' output and input enhancement in promoting language learning or uptake. In this design, the researcher inspects the evidence for the conjecture he finds interesting after considering the previous inquiries on this topic. However, he is also cognizant of the fact that the results his research yields are prone to further inspection by future research.

Izumi (2002) calls his study a controlled experimental study with a pretest–posttest design which involves four treatment groups and one control group. The treatment groups vary in terms of output requirements and exposure to enhanced input. Subjects are recruited on the basis of a test of English relativization, which also serve as the pretest of the experiment. Those who have rudimentary knowledge of relativization (as certain learnability requirements specified) are invited to the study. Also, as for the assignment of the subjects to the treatment groups, in order to make sure that the subjects are equivalent in their knowledge of English relativization, they are assigned to different groups by using a stratified random assignment procedure which is based on the pretest results. Then, since the selected subjects in the sample are not assigned to the treatment randomly, the study becomes a quasi-experiment rather than a true experiment design (cf. Shadish, 2006). He aims at diminishing the plausibility of explaining the outcome with some cause other than the treatment, that is, he intends to explain the increase in learning outcomes just with either of the two attention drawing techniques. He assumes that when designed in such a manner, his inquiry can yield a close-to-the-truth explanation of the causal relationship between the two attention drawing techniques and L2 learning outcomes, and that it can increase the level of objectivity of its findings including “empirically verifiable knowledge” (Crotty, 1998, p. 27) by minimizing the intervention of other factors.

## Findings

Izumi (2002) contributes to understanding the role of having learners produce output and providing them with enhanced input so as to capture their attention to the target form presented. The study yields evidence to document three major findings, which also provide pedagogical implications for L2 teachers. First, compared with providing the same input just for comprehension, the output-input treatment contributes to subjects' learning English relativization. Second, even though it is clearly indicated in the scores that the enhancement significantly impacts the noticing of target form items in the input, visual input enhancement does not show any measurable effect on learning. Third, the study does not provide support for the hypothesis “that the effects of output on noticing and learning were comparable to those of input enhancement” (p. 565). Izumi leaves to the readers the application of these findings to actual classroom materials and environment. He does not allot any space to explicitly note the teaching implications of these findings. What this study documents is aligned with the argument that the mere provision of comprehensible input does not lead to learner intake and that how learners interact with this input is pivotal. Thus, it constitutes a new building block adding to the edifice of knowledge from a post-positivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

## **Becoming First Graders in an L2: An Ethnographic Study of L2 Socialization**

Willett (1995) presents a one-year ethnographic study of four first-grade limited English proficient (LEP) pupils. She attends to their access to the languaculture<sup>6</sup> of the classroom through the construction of their social relations, identities, and ideologies in the social world of the classroom. Her study is theoretically framed by language socialization through the micro-politics of social interaction. From these lenses, language learning is conceived of as the process of becoming a member of a sociocultural group. Through their participation in social activity, individuals co-construct common understandings of the activity. While engaging in this process, new members utilize the language and skills forming the activity, thereby enhancing their concepts and language (Willett, 1995). For the purpose of the study, the researcher spends a year as a teacher's aide in the classroom conducting participatory observation and taking field notes throughout her daily interactions with the students. She systematically audiotapes three of the LEP children, extensively interviews the teacher and parents, collects artifacts from the classroom, gathers test results and other school records and conducts a sociometric test to confirm her ethnographic analyses of the social structure in the class.

This study also attempts to strip from the field of SLA the predominance of the focus on the individual, which has generated a complicated and confusing picture of L2 learning according to sociocultural theorists. Willett (1995) attends to the premise that individual and social aspects of language are dialectically meshed. She asserts that individual-focused investigations pay insufficient attention to the interpenetration between the complex social context and individual functioning in that context since social context does not mean anything more than a variable for them. Therefore, focusing on situated micro-interaction over time, her ethnographic study aims to unveil crucial processes which have been ignored in SLA research thus far.

### **Constructivist Epistemology**

In stark contrast to objectivism and positivism which embrace the premise that meaning inheres in the object and there is an objective truth merely waiting to be discovered, constructivist epistemology asserts that human beings construct truth or meaning through their involvement with the realities in the world. In this view of knowledge, various individuals might construct meaning in varying modes or manners, even if they engage with the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism postulates that social reality cannot be considered independent of social and cultural context, and therefore is "a socially, and very often multiply, constructed reality," which leads to the notion of partnership between subject and object in meaning making processes (Smith, 1990, p. 175). It abandons the subject-object duality in support of the investigator-investigated interaction (Smith, 1990). In other words, human practices play a pivotal role for all knowledge and therefore

<sup>6</sup> "Languaculture is a term coined by Agar (1994) to help readers keep in mind the theoretical notion that language and culture are inextricably entwined and that to treat them separately distorts both concepts" (Willett, 1995, p. 474).

all meaningful reality, which is constructed as a consequence of the “interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essential social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This necessitates acknowledging and exploiting the interactivity between researcher and researched in the inquiry process (Lincoln, 1990).

Willett’s (1995) epistemological commitments undergirding her ethnographic study seem largely aligned with the constructivist viewpoint. Her choice of conceptual framework reveals some ideas regarding her epistemic leanings. For instance, the author’s conceptualization of L2 learning accentuates the inadequacy of the focus on psycholinguistic experiences of individual learners detached from their sociocultural contexts. She advocates for a socioculturalist view, warning “researchers against examining individuals and their interpersonal and sociocultural contexts separately” (p. 474). As Rodby (1992, cited in Willett, 1995) states:

Literacy practices involve a dialectical merging of individual and social aspects of language: one part cannot exist without another; each part acquires its properties from its relations to the other parts; properties of each evolve as a result of their interpenetration. (p. 474)

In order to capture both individual and social characteristics of language, Willett (1995) attends to three constructs playing crucial roles in the particular L2 learning setting: communicative events, interactional routines, and strategies. Thus, Willett’s conception of L2 learning process proves consistent with the central constructivist notion of subject-object partnership in the generation of meaning and the interactivity between human beings and their world.

### **Methodological Approach: Ethnography**

As the methodology of her research, Willett (1995) utilizes ethnography in which the investigator attempts to provide a written description of a group of individuals in their own natural milieu (Bernard, 1994; Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This methodological choice supports her constructivist leanings. As discussed above, constructivism posits that all reality and all knowledge encompass intersubjective meanings that rest upon social consensus among participants in a particular context, and that reality is therefore multiplistic and ever changing (Greene, 1990). Ethnography as a methodology presents a venue to observe how the ethnographer’s interaction with the participants, or his or her participation in their context, leads to a construction of knowledge between ethnographer, participants and the sociocultural context. Besides, this methodology “situates language deeply and inextricably in social life and offers a particular and distinct ontology and epistemology to ethnography” (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 7). Bearing this in mind, in order to investigate four LEP students’ access to languaculture of the classroom, Willett utilizes ethnography to study people in their daily life and to acquire a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) by attending particularly to their meaning making processes. This methodology is functional for (a) exploring the meanings different actors are generating in and out of a situation, (b) producing a valid understanding of the complexities of local situations, and (c) observing sociocultural processes while they are happening (Anderson-Levitt, 2006).

The ethnographic methods Willett (1995) utilizes provide more extensive information about how ESL students gain communicative competence and construct identities, social relations and ideologies through socially significant interactional routines. She works as a teacher's aide to be able to conduct participant observation in the mainstream classroom including ESL students for one year. Spending a long time in the field gives ethnographers an opportunity to observe processes unfolding and to track cultural changes and the socialization of children (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Wolcott, 2008). Additionally, participant observation supports the "dualistic approach" that ethnography leads the researcher to adopt, that is, to have both emic and etic perspectives (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p.285). Zeroing in on the insiders' views, an ethnographer needs to participate to some degree in the situations studied, but also to describe the implicit levels of culture, observing "from an outsiders' perspective to make visible the invisible" (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 285). An emic perspective is necessary to interact with the participants in the context, and an etic perspective is necessary to interpret these interactions and construction of knowledge. Being undergirded by constructivist epistemology, these two perspectives rely on the assumption that the knowledge constructed by the participants undergoes another construction when the researcher interprets it. Thus, the inquiry narrative reports a *doubly* constructed knowledge or reality.

## Findings

Drawing upon ethnographic data from three ESL girls working together in phonics seatwork, Willett (1995) underscores the limitations of adopting individuals as the unit of analysis in mainstream SLA. Participants in her study employed a range of socioculturally mediated interaction routines in the process of constructing their sociolinguistic and academic identities. By recognizing the inconclusiveness of the individual as the unit of analysis and the dynamics of a particular sociocultural setting within which language learners function, Willett aims to initiate a reconceptualization from understanding "interactional routines and strategies [that] are correlated with successful language acquisition" (p.499). She embraces "meaning routines and strategies in the local culture and how they enable learners to construct positive identities and relations and manage competing agendas" (p. 499). This reconceptualization requires L2 teachers to revise their practices by placing more emphasis on the fact that language and culture are two inextricably intertwined concepts and that constructing an L2 identity to communicate in a culture is an inevitable component of L2 learning which has not been sufficiently addressed in L2 teaching so far. In other words, Willett's findings call for the reconsideration of L2 teaching which has been tremendously impacted by SLA research in its assignation of peripheral roles to or thorough neglect of the social and cultural aspects of L2 learning process.

### Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning

Norton (1995) presents a 12-month case study of five immigrant women in Canada. Her study demonstrates how and under what conditions the immigrant

women created, responded to, and sometimes resisted opportunities to speak English. She contends that SLA theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that reflects the power relations experienced and created by the language learner in relation to the language learning context. "They have drawn artificial distinctions between the individual language learner and larger, frequently inequitable social structures" which are reproduced and reshaped in daily social interactions (p. 25). Having underscored this shortcoming of extant SLA research, Norton calls for reconceptualization of the notions of the individual and the language learner's personality in SLA theory so that dichotomous distinctions between the L2 learner and learning context can be problematized. She brings to the fore "the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity" (p. 12).

Her examination of the relationship between language learners and their social world rests upon a poststructuralist conception of social identity and subjectivity as multiple, sites of power struggle, and changing over time (Bakhtin, 1981; Bourdieu, 1977; Derrida, 1970/1978; Foucault, 1980; Lacan, 1977; Weedon, 1987). Humanist conceptions of the individual that have impacted most definitions of the individual in SLA research presume that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent core such as introvert/extrovert, motivated/unmotivated, field dependent/ field independent (Norton, 1995). However, poststructuralism portrays "the individual as diverse, contradictory, and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered" (Norton, 1995, p. 15).

Poststructuralism offers a novel perspective to understand the generation of knowledge which is the ultimate aim of research. It problematizes the nature of the individual vis-à-vis knowledge construction. Post-positivism argues that like in natural sciences, the acquisition of objective, empirically verifiable knowledge is probable in social sciences, while constructivism highlights the role of social and cultural contexts in knowledge construction which is the product of interaction between individual and social reality. In contrast, poststructuralism attends to how knowledge generation is impacted by the intentionality and motivation of the individuals involved in a constant negotiation with the relevant constituencies, agendas and discourses which determine, transform, and regulate the power dynamics in the social and cultural contexts.

### Poststructuralist Theoretical Perspective

Maintaining an anti-foundationalism in epistemology and a new emphasis upon perspectivism in interpretation, the poststructuralist viewpoint questions "scientism" in the human sciences (Peters & Burbules, 2004). It also presents a challenge to rationalism<sup>7</sup> and realism which structuralism<sup>8</sup> subscribes to, following a positivist line of thinking – "with its Promethean faith in scientific method, in

<sup>7</sup> Rationalism asserts that "knowledge is due to the exercise of the faculty of reason or intellect and that sensory experience cannot establish certainty" (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 587) and it "emphasizes the a priori and also the innate" (Lacey, 1996, p. 286).

<sup>8</sup> "The basic claim of structuralism is that all social phenomena, no matter how diverse their superficial appearance, are internally connected and organized according to some unconscious patterns. These internal relations and patterns constitute structures, and uncovering these structures is the object of human studies" (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 662).

progress, and in the capacity of research to discern and identify universal structures of cultures and the human mind" (ibid., p. 24).

Poststructuralism repudiates the presupposition that there exist such "transcendental signifieds" as essence, existence, substance, consciousness, structure, which are acknowledged as rigid and unquestionable foundations for knowing. When such underlying a priori foundations are abandoned in the process of "knowing," there emerge the "structurality of structure" and the unlimited "play" of interpretations (Derrida, 1978 cited in Bredo, 2006, p. 19). This is closely related with Derrida's fierce opposition to the unchanging relationship between signifier (word) and signified (concept) in structuralism. Derrida teases apart the fundamental unity of word and concept and suggests that signifiers and signifieds move on a slippery ground where "signifiers constantly turn into signifieds, which keep turning into signifiers" (Crotty, 1998, p. 205). This leads to infinite substitutions or play of signification including a whole succession of signifiers and signifieds (Derrida, 1970/1978). Pointing out the crisis of representation or signification, Derrida argues that the structure which is given a center and referred to as a point of presence, a fixed origin, should be decentered to open a ground for the abovementioned play. By decentering structure and sovereign subject, we can generate suspicion about the humanist understanding of the human subject, and then fixed characteristics are conceived as ways of valorizing particular human traits over and above other equally human qualities (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

Moreover, Foucault's notions concerning power and knowledge constitute one of the pivotal tenets of poststructuralism. While critiquing and repudiating the structuralist view of power, Foucault (1980) contends that "power in its exercise goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power" (p. 72). He sees power as a productive dynamic which is disseminated throughout the social system and has an intimate relation to knowledge, that is, it is productive because it does not simply repress; it also generates a new body of knowledge, which may also lead to liberation (Peters & Burbules, 2004). In other words, knowledge can be exploited so as to gain power, power can be used to preclude our acquisition of knowledge, and knowledge can liberate us from the impacts of power.

Norton (1995) explicitly notes that she has selected a poststructuralist stance as a theoretical perspective undergirding her study. This stance is evident in her novel conceptualization of social identity, language learning and motivation in SLA research, which gives a thorough picture of the relationship between language learner and the social context. She directs attention to the dichotomous distinctions between the language learner and the social world which have impeded SLA research from yielding an adequate depiction of social identities of language learners. She also criticizes previous SLA research for not questioning how power relations in the social world influence social interaction between L2 learners and target language speakers. SLA theorists have not sufficiently investigated how inequity in power relations diminishes the opportunities to practice the target language in real life settings. Therefore, complexities of social identity of language learners must be examined by considering the larger inequitable social structures which are reproduced in daily social interactions.

It is also crucial to note that language is a means through which “a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and gains access to—or is denied access to—powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak” (Norton, 1995, p. 13). Furthermore, Norton highlights that affective factors such as motivation, introvert/extrovert, and inhibition are “socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual” (p. 12). Finally, she suggests the notion of investment in lieu of motivation in language learning. She postulates that learners’ investment in a L2 will help them obtain a wider array of “symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” and will expect to get a good return on that investment which “will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources” (p. 17). Also, she accentuates that an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own social identity, which is continuously changing across time and space since language learners continuously organize and reorganize “a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 18).

Norton’s (1995) approach to data evinces poststructuralist leanings, too. For example, while explicating how Martina (a participant) responded to and created opportunities to practice English, she draws on the poststructuralist view that social identity is non-unitary, contradictory and ever-changing. Norton associates Martina’s perseverance in speaking and her courage to resist marginalization with her social identity as a mother who had to deal with the public world. In this role she had to defend the family’s rights against unscrupulous social practices regardless of her command of the English tense system, the strange looks she received from her interlocutors, and her feelings of inferiority. As another example, Norton rests upon the conception of social identity as ever-changing while expounding upon how Eva (another participant) over time responded to and created opportunities to practice English in her workplace. Relying on the data gleaned through interviews and diary entries, the researcher concludes that “it was only over time that Eva’s conception of herself as an immigrant—an ‘illegitimate’ speaker of English—changed to a conception of herself as a multicultural citizen with the power to impose reception” (pp. 23-4).

### **Methodological Approach: Case Study**

Norton (1995) utilizes case study as the methodological approach in her inquiry, which is compatible with a poststructuralist theoretical perspective. Case study is selected due to its strength in providing a profound examination of a case in its real life context, in which a poststructuralist perspective may discuss the social identity as ever-changing and contradictory. Its best application is when inquiry seeks for answers for explanatory or descriptive questions through firsthand knowledge of people and events investigated (Yin, 2006). It is the triangulation of several data collection instruments that contributes to the profound scrutiny of the case since triangulation establishes “converging lines of evidence to make your findings as robust as possible” (Yin, 2006, p. 115).

Some of the data are gleaned from the informants themselves, which allows for the inclusion of more perspectives about the phenomenon of interest and multiple ways of constructing knowledge in the inquiry. Norton’s participants keep records

of their interactions with Anglophone Canadians and use diaries to reflect on their language learning experiences in the home, workplace, and community from January to June 1991. She aims at observing the impact of the home, workplace, and community discourses upon the participants' language learning process, capitalizing on their identities in different social and cultural discourses. During the course of the study, she meets with participants on a regular basis to discuss some of the entries in their diaries and to talk about their insights and concerns. Also, before and after the study, she administers two questionnaires in order to gather more data. She conducts personal and group interviews and visits them several times at their homes. Particularly diaries, meetings, interviews, and visiting homes are the methods that enrich the firsthand understanding of the people in their real life context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), which a poststructuralist framework views as crucially important, for instance, in observing the changes in social identity over time through interactions with target language speakers (Norton, 2010).

Norton's approach to case study as a research method can be considered to be slightly diverging from a poststructuralist standpoint. Poststructuralism eschews drawing clear cut lines in understanding phenomena or providing explanations depending on bounded settings because of the slippery ground of signifiers and signifieds. However, for the sake of discipline in her inquiry, Norton defines a bounded case which is not disconnected from the wider structure and discourse driving the larger social setting. Therefore, in terms of drawing the boundaries of her case, Norton's inquiry seems to be departing from poststructuralist perspective, whereas her concentration on the interconnectedness between the case and the context is compatible with poststructuralism.

## Findings

Different from mainstream SLA research that views individual learners artificially disconnected from the larger social structure within which L2 learning occurs, Norton (1995) makes the point that "the individual language learner is not ahistorical and unidimensional but has a complex and sometimes contradictory social identity, changing across time and space" (pp. 25-26). In line with this framework, Norton suggests that motivation can only be understood within the broader social context regulated by the social relations of power that provide affordances or constraints for language learners. Drawing upon her ethnographic data from two immigrants and her reading in social theory and poststructuralist conception of identity as a multifaceted phenomenon, Norton expands the theoretical conceptualization of motivation by arguing that learners' investment in the target language must be understood in relation to the complex nature of their identities. This theoretical argument translates as welcoming and integrating language learners' multiple social identities within the classroom walls and promoting their right to speak beyond the classroom walls. She suggests "classroom-based social research"<sup>9</sup> as a potential method to promote the complex interplay between the social identities of students within formal L2 curriculum and the socially-mediated opportunities to speak with target language speakers

<sup>9</sup> Norton (1995) defines classroom-based social research "as collaborative research that is carried out by language learners in their local communities with the active guidance and support of the language teacher. In many ways, language learners become ethnographers in their local communities" (p. 26).

outside the classroom (Norton, 1995, p. 26). Therefore, Norton's findings suggest that because L2 teaching is responsible for preparing L2 learners for survival in a social setting, it must take into account how social factors can influence the extent and the way L2 learners communicate in the target language and participate in the community. Norton's inquiry emphasizes that L2 teaching practices should help the learners imagine themselves as legitimate users and owners of the target language, aware of the power relations regulating the social structure. For example, in order to fulfill this goal, L2 instructors can construct an instructional setting in which L2 learners are treated as "valuable intellectual and cultural resources in their classroom community and their unique contributions should be given adequate legitimacy" (Morita, 2004, p. 598). Thereby, their active participation as actors in the classroom will be expanded and extended to their social interactions so that they can become audible in the society (Miller, 1999).

### Conclusion

In sum, the analysis of these three articles provides a picture of the complexities in L2 learning processes. Izumi (2002) attends to the individualistic side of L2 learning by expounding upon how having learners produce output in the target language differs from provision of visually enhanced input. Relying on the notion of languaculture, Willett (1995) investigates how interconnectedness between the sociocultural setting in the classroom informs L2 learning. Drawing upon poststructuralist understanding of social identity, Norton (1995) theorizes a novel way to conceive language learners' identity considering the power relations existing in their interactions with target language speakers. When all three are considered, there are many variables to be taken into consideration while explicating how an individual acquires a L2. Language learning is influenced by the way individuals are exposed to the target language or whether they are led to produce it or not. Also, language learners need to become familiarized with the culture of the setting in which they are being exposed to the target language since language and culture are two inseparable social entities. Learning social routines in communicative events leads them to become communicatively competent in the L2. Besides, language learners' interactions with the target language speakers impact their social identity. Thus, language learning processes should overcome the divide between classroom and the community. Learners should be provided opportunities to interact with target language speakers in the community, which contributes to constructing their social identity. In brief, putting these three studies side by side presents us the opportunity to see these various layers of L2 learning processes.

With regards to the diverging philosophical paradigms undergirding the research process, each of the studies examined in this paper draws on a different research orientation informed by a particular epistemology. As observed in these three inquiries, disparate understandings of "knowing" (positivist objectivity, constructivist social-collaboration, and poststructuralist multiple subjectivities) lead to disparate methodologies in SLA research, and this divergence is closely connected with the conflicting conceptualizations of L2 learning processes. In this way the epistemological disparity existing in the realm of SLA research contributes to the explanation of the considerable differences in the ways SLA scholars understand how an L2 is learned.

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