Assessing the individual: Theatre of the absurd
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Part I

[Two researchers in white coats are looking at a "participant" sitting off to one side.]

Prof. Cincer: Ok, we want to see how much this participant knows all by herself.

Prof. Trien: So we should have no other people in the room when we test her. And we must make sure that she has no books or papers.

Prof. Cincer: Yes. But, perhaps, one paper and a pencil to write the answers to the questions.

Prof. Trien: No no no no. The pencil is a tool that brings with it all kinds of thoughts. When you write you change your thoughts and your mind and you learn all kinds of things. We want to find out what she knows all by herself now. Writing will make her change. So no paper, no pencil.

Prof. Cincer: No paper? No pencil? well. . . ok. And what kind of questions will we ask her?

Prof. Trien: Ummmm. I think maybe we should not ask her anything. You know when you ask someone something it helps her to think a lot. And she creates all kinds of new thoughts and then we have no control over what she knows right now. No no no, questions complicate things. We just want to know what she knows all by herself. No questions.

Prof. Cincer: No paper? No questions? . . . Then how will she know what to do or say?

Prof. Trien: Well, if we really want to know what she knows all by herself we cannot be there with her. We will have to observe her from behind a hidden mirror, you know, because, if we are there, we might stimulate her to think things that she doesn't already know and that will ruin the experiment. We must not be seen.

Prof. Cincer: No paper, no pen, no questions, no us. Just her sitting, at a table.

Prof. Trien: No table, . . . no chair.

Prof. Cincer: No table, . . . no . . . chair? Just her . . . alone . . . in a room?

Prof. Trien: . . . ummmm, . . . can we get rid of the room?

Part II

The short sketch above was inspired by Wertsch et al. (1993). In the article, they contend that the "unit of analysis" for psychological research is the "individual" functioning "together with mediational means" (p. 341). This sketch plays upon the conventional idea of trying to isolate an individual for assessment, divorced from their contributing environment and our mediational means, i.e., our ways of accessing, displaying, and creating our knowledge. This last is very important. Our tools, mediational means, continually allow us to construct knowledge.

These mediational means may be things like pencils and paper, books, computers, or even other people. Our agency, i.e. our ability to act and learn, goes "beyond the skin" (i.e. we are not restricted to the border of our own bodies) when we use tools to accomplish tasks and collaborate with others. Wertsch et al. gives the example of the blind person with the cane. The blind person can "see" beyond their body by using the cane. Neurobiologically, our body image becomes "the individual together with mediational means." We notice this, for example, when we drive the same car or ride the same bike regularly, and then change to another. It takes awhile before we adjust our self-car-bike body image and feel comfortable with a new kind of extended body.

Identifying the mediational means in a classroom situation opens the door to allowing us to also "*identify with*" these means and the class. When students identify the rejoinder "Wow!" as a useful item to use and then use it in interaction, they may begin to identify with its use and feel like a more competent L2 user. They might further identify with the class community whose members all say, "Wow!" when they hear something exciting. Thus, we might say the class has come into our mind-body image, we are in rapport, "one with," this particular group of people, or in Bonny Norton's terms, part of the same imagined community (2001). We might even take their dialogic capacities away with us (internalize them) and use them in our own minds, and allow them to further mediate our learning. Depending on our personal history and creativity with these mediational means, they will display differing abilities and different potentials in each of us. These identifications help us to expand our "zones of proximal development" where we can learn to do things (with tools and other learners) that we don't yet have the ability to do alone.

While teachers and researchers may understand how knowledge-production becomes more transparent and fluid when people talk about it, there is still the question of assessment. How do we assess someone's work? Conventional means, at times, seem to be lost in the "theatre of the absurd" as the sketch above suggests. Thus, some researchers are looking more holistically at portfolio-assessment, socio-grams of relationships in classes (see Murphey, 1999, who cites even Confucius as evaluating students on their social relationships), having students make their own tests as a means of understanding what they think they have learned, and giving interactive task-based tests (see, Murphey, 1995, 1998 for these last two). These methods also show how knowledge at first is not only socially constructed but specifically situated in the knower's world.

Often it also becomes clearer to teachers and researchers that during testing (or gathering data) students are still constructing knowledge, using the tests and evaluations as learning events. Swain, for example, has observed that students learn a lot during the actual stimulated recall sessions in her SLA research (2000). In other words, through talking about what they were doing on the tape, the students had new realizations (constructed knowledge) and learned more in the recall session. This is potentially what is happening when I ask students to collaboratively transcribe their video or audio recorded conversations and correct the transcription (Murphey, 2001). While self-assessment may be heretical in some traditional settings and can backfire in some cases, allowing my students to do self-assessment seems to encourage more metacognitive awareness of their own abilities and they seem to know better how to proceed with further knowledge building.

Part III

Some Tentative Learning Socialization Points

1. Knowledge can be embedded and created everywhere, in and with artifacts and environments and people. It can also be blocked by certain rules (Don't talk to your partners!) and structures (no dictionaries!).

2. Knowledge is unequally dynamic and changing and distributed in and with artifacts and environments and people.

3. People as agents have unequally dynamic abilities to access and create this knowledge. They also can block its creation and distribution within themselves and to others. Thus, knowledge is power, but more importantly *access to knowledge* and *access to the making of knowledg*e are even more powerful. (Modern pedagogy is telling us that we cannot "transmit" knowledge in any case, and thus, the job of the teacher is to facilitate the last two, to provide *access to and access to the making of knowledge*.)

4. People-together form a highly complex potential for socially distributed cognition with creative emergent qualities. Putting groups of people together to talk about topics of shared interest can allow new ideas and structures to develop. This can be in a class, cafe, or cyber space.

5. *Identifying* and *identifying with* are steps to incorporation (internalization) of mediational means that extend agency considerably beyond the skin. At first, I might *identify* a word as useful, and then through using it several times I begin to *identify with* it as part of myself. My agency goes beyond the skin when I say the

word out loud for others to hear or when I send it via email. "Peace."

The construction of knowledge perspective for SLA was already there 25 years ago in Hatch's suggestion, via Long, that "rather than grammatical knowledge developing in order to be put to use in conversations at some later date, 'language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations' (Hatch, 1978, p. 404)," (cited in Long, 1996, p. 445). Or in Bateson's (1994) words, "participation precedes learning" (p. 41, see also ethnographer Waton-Gegeo's work on Language Socialization). We might ask ourselves if students are being held back on the peripheral of learning too long by teachers teaching and testing too much and not allowing students to participate in learning more fully (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Creating suitable environments conducive to intense, multiple, and safe participation in foreign language interaction would seem to be one of the main jobs of language teachers. Assessing students' success at learning in these ways may not be easy. But it will be vastly better than assessing well the ways they do not learn.

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