

Purpose and Pitfalls of Constructivist Methodology:

Probing Image-based Language Acquisition

James B. Anderson, Ph.D.

**Al Yamamah University
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

2008 Symposium

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Introduction

As an educator new to the Saudi Arabian experience, I have spent a considerable amount of time deliberating on how to frame my interest in Constructivist instructional techniques into a research paper that might be of benefit to those teachers already fully engaged with students learning the English language.

After all, I join my new colleagues with the full understanding that it is *I* who is in need of *their* expertise, and not vice versa. I feel strongly that I must first gain insight into the needs of my students, and fully settle into this new cultural climate. Only the passage of time and the prolonged examination of my own teaching techniques at Al Yamamah University will help me assess the degree of success I reach in facilitating my students' acquisition of the targeted language.

In no way do my past teaching experiences automatically guarantee me instant success in my new setting. Most certainly, it is *I* who will experience a vertical learning curve. It is for this reason that I have elected to approach this symposium with the understanding that self-education is an ongoing process and that continued self-study is crucial to any sustained commitment to the teaching profession. Through this research I seek to:

- 1.) Engage in the development of a self-study model designed to clearly bring to bear elements of Constructivist teacher facilitation in an educational setting.
- 2.) Briefly give a historical overview of the linguistic benefits of including Image-based Theory in classroom activities.
- 3.) Outline the theoretical foundations for Vygotskian Constructivist classroom delivery.
- 4.) Use my findings to create a template for self-evaluation
- 5.) Use findings from a yet-to-be-created Self-Assessment instrument to improve my own approach to the process of facilitating language acquisition for my Saudi Arabian students.

SECTION ONE:

PRESENTING A CASE FOR PROCESS-BASED SELF-STUDY

Patton's Narrative Inquiry

One of the principle intents of my proposed self-study is to capture how individuals make sense of imagery in a setting that promotes the acquisition of English. I do not have any a priori intention to *prove* anything, per se, through this study. I present an approach quite different from the “prefigured” methodological approach described by Eisner (1981, p. 184). Instead, I will use “process studies,” which focus on how something happens, rather than the outcomes or results obtained (Patton, 1995, p. 94). “What we do is less important than how we do it,” says Patton (p. 94).

This type of study uses qualitative methodologies, and is not based on the importance of predictability and control (Patton, p. 89), because the methods of narrative inquiry stand on their own as “reasonable ways” to examine phenomenology (p. 90). Using a case study approach has become a “mainstay” of educational research and evaluation over the last thirty years (Merriam, 1988). In my opinion, the gritty, contentious nature of postmodern thought provides the groundwork for a fresh approach to the meaning-making process in general, and language acquisition in particular.

Case Study Methodology

Through this study, I seek to give agency to the narratives of classroom participants— including myself (in the multiple role facilitator, participant, and interpreter of my own data collection.) I believe that narrative inquiry, with its emphasis

on vignettes of lived experience, would provide the means through which I could examine each of the participants' responses to my approaches. I am interested in exploring how each viewer responds to what they see in imagery and what sources they draw from in their personal lives. These responses, in turn, indicate how well each student expresses himself in English.

This study gives us the opportunity to describe what we see, to make associations between the images in question and our own experiences, and to interpret these associations in an effort to resolve gaps in our collective funds of knowledge. My driving question was: "How do my students make meaning from imagery?" From this point of initial inquiry, I hope to better know how these individuals respond to imagery, based on phenomenological circumstances and varying forms of verbal and nonverbal communication. Finally, I hope to accurately monitor how they encode and decode linguistic information and convert it into the English language.

Using Participants as a Gauge for Teacher Effectiveness

Pending my students' approval, as well as that of the administrative personnel at Al Yamamah College, I hope to draw my participants from at least one of my ESL classes. I would select participants according to two basic criteria. I predict that students will give "information-rich, thick description" (Merriam, 2001, p. 29). I hope to acquire respondents who are interested in language, literacy, and sociocultural studies. Involving participants acquainted with the field of semiotics is more likely to produce 'informed' dialogue about multiple forms of literacy. This procedural measure helps create an opportunity to triangulate data collection in yet another way, through multi-faceted, case-

study methodology. I hope that the participants' educational, religious, ethnic, and philosophical differences and similarities will make a lively study of human perception and cognition. Secondly, that my students' advances in linguistic perception and cognition serve as an emotive springboard toward growth in reading, writing, speaking, and internalizing English as a valuable supplement to their personal education.

MacDonald and Walker (1977, p. 181), and Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 371) state that the purpose of case study research is "to reveal the properties of the class to which the instance being studied belongs." They indicate that the objectives for case study methodology and narrative analysis using qualitative methods aid in the "comprehensive understanding" of the groups under study. I hope to accomplish this through a form of case study characterized by Merriam as "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" (2001, p. 29).

Over twenty five years ago, Stake described how previously unknown relationships and variables could be expected to emerge from a case study such as the one that I wish to undertake. I expect that insights into "how things get to be the way they are" will result from such an approach (Stake, 1981, p. 47). Participants will not be purposely connected by ethnicity, political affiliation, or philosophical / religious compatibility.

Data Collection

In order to obtain the most comprehensive understanding of my participants' response to my image-based language courses, I will approach this study from different angles. I intend to find ways to tap into the respondents' various forms of intelligence

and communicative styles. I will use methodological procedures that explore the sociocultural backgrounds of the participants, which includes myself. I will design procedures that will allow me to gain an understanding of the experiences of each individual. In an effort to see how they make sense of image-based language acquisition, I will use data collection methods based on several modalities of interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1981).

I feel it is important to triangulate my findings through interpretive techniques as articulated by Patton (1990) and Denzin (1986), among others. This triangulation indicates how participants address specific issues related to their lives on an intellectual, emotive, and visceral level as each student progresses in his acquisition of English.

Data Analysis

Patton (1990) noted that by approaching my data collection from different angles, I may gain insight into my participants' varying learning styles. He referred to this methodology as the "mixed form" strategy of data collection, in preparation for analysis (p. 193). Patton (1990, p. 377) cautioned us that there is typically "not a precise point at which data collection ends and data analysis begins". Patton (1990) and others refer to this type of qualitative data collection as a dynamic and elusive entity, ever-changing as new understandings develop and new directions are formulated. I, too, may find that analysis is often difficult to separate from strict data collection. The collective energies of the co-participants in this study may produce shifting levels of points of importance and relevancy as we collectively evaluate our overall scholastic successes.

Therefore, rather than predict the exact course that my data collection and analysis would take, I intend to implement what Patton called “sensitizing concepts” (1990, p. 391). Patton referred to sensitizing concepts as those that “provide a basic framework highlighting the importance of certain kinds of events, activities, and behaviors” (p. 216). These sensitizing concepts can often induce and reflect certain culturally engrained attitudes and alert me to ways of facilitating classroom activities. Blumer (1969, p. 148) noted that these sensitizing concepts could help orient the research through a “general sense of reference” and provide “directions along which to look.”

I may see patterns developing as a result of both the cross current of information due to differences among the participants, as well as any epiphanic moments that each participant experiences. Denzin (1989) thoroughly described the importance of these existential revelations as a precursor to the formulation of mutual linguistic understandings.

I cannot help but think that there are still multiple options available in this process of coding the data. One approach is to directly analyze and code the participants’ original three-part (descriptive, associative, and interpretive) responses to image-based language acquisition in assignment form. A second procedure is to be looking for key elements that appear from the respondents’ writings. In actuality, I believe that it seems likely that the merging of the two approaches and the resulting triangulation would lend itself well to establishing credibility, transferability, and other concerns of academic trustworthiness.

Role of Researcher

The relationship between the teacher/researcher and participants is critical to the success of interpretive, ethnographic case studies. Patton (1990) referred to an ethnographer's technique as one of "empathetic neutrality." This neutrality does not mean pure objectivity, but rather that the "investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths" (p. 55). I am also the individual responsible for collecting and coding data of importance, as well as the analyst of the findings. My own reaction to imagery, my reaction to what the respondents produce, and my reaction through the analysis process cannot help but influence these multiple roles. As such, I recognize that it is impossible to remain objective throughout the research process. Interpretive ethnography neither paves the road to certainty, nor does it automatically manufacture a blueprint for essentialist conclusions. This particular system of participatory discovery stands at the epicenter of the methodological fault line, due to the "existentially problematic moments in the lives of individuals" and the resulting fragile and tenuous understandings so confounding to the essentialist paradigm (Denzin, 1989, p. 129). The key issue is whether or not my Saudi students benefit from dialogic, Socratic, self-discovery methodologies as we collectively seek effective practice in the acquisition of English.

Ethics and Politics

This proposed self-study is purely qualitative and subjective. I am examining my own teaching methodology and subjecting it to my own personal scrutiny. I seek to

critique my classroom demeanor, closely observe the response of my students, and examine the results of their collective linguistic efforts. On some level, their progress will be in relationship to their enthusiasm toward the task at hand. I suspect that my students' gains, or lack thereof, will be tied to both *their* buy-in to S.I.L.C. theory and praxis and to *me* as their facilitator and mentor.

Any pure form of political and ethical objectivity on the part of the researcher is neither possible, nor desired (Merriam, 2001). Lincoln (1981) warned that it is relatively easy for the researcher to skew the data by choosing only those comments that fit a self-created paradigm. This ethical concern, I believe, would be more problematic if I were seeking to justify a specific claim. Thus, I intend that this study will be relatively free of ethical, problematic happenstance. Merriam (2001) reminds us, ethical concerns extend into the area of how the researcher conducts his / her data collection. I realize that as researcher, I must abstain from being a seemingly disinterested outsider, nor from attempting to influence the participants' innermost perceptions, values, and beliefs.

Scholastic Trustworthiness

Traditional methodological research systems were rated on their ability to be reproduced under like-circumstances (Denzin, 1989). More recently, interpretive ethnographers such as Lincoln and Guba (1981), Patton (1990), and Merriam (2001) have insisted that reproducibility is not the point of trustworthiness. Merriam (2001) stated that the object of credibility of a case study is not whether it can be reproduced in identical fashion, but whether the study is true to itself. Issues of triangulation, verification, and member checking at appropriate intervals, as well as the accuracy with

which I record what is expressed to me by my second-language learners is really the intended objective.

Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to a case study as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). This bounded context is both dynamic and self-generating, so issues of transferability are established on a universal level. Rather, epiphanies, in the Denzinian sense, occur at any moment and produce ruptures of new knowledge when least expected. Issues of dependability do not lie in the creation of a body of work espousing blanket truisms that can be applied to future cases. Instead, I believe that the dependability of this proposed study rests on my shoulders. My task is to accurately record and reflect upon the linguistic gains of my student-participants.

SECTION TWO: CLASSROOM METHODOLOGY

Student-Centered Language Acquisition

Geertz “believes, with Max Weber, that (a hu)man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Further, Geertz worked within the conception of a culture as an “integrated, semiotic system”, although, as Iggers points out, one which lacks “differentiation and conflict” (Iggers, 1997, p. 107).

Nevertheless, Geertz’s work is often highly praised for its timeliness in a domain which had, up to that point, largely resisted students’ own *microhistoria* as a viable investigative tool with which to spike students’ interest in learning a new language. Sociocultural language theory is based on the idea that students would rather center on their own

interests than obediently recite dictums issued by forces standing outside their particular realm of lived experience.

Research clearly indicates that rote memorization, endless work-sheets of terms and vocabulary words, and other such previously accepted approaches are simply not very effective. In time, student morale slumps. Constructivist teachers who employ elements of interpretive ethnography, multi-modal semiotics, image-based theory and research, and a general application of relativistic inquiry often serve to inspire and invigorate students learning another language.

The Traditionalist's faith in a one-size-fits-all, "canned" curriculum has been questioned by Foucault and others who insist that (for many students) history has no unity, but is marked by "ruptures", which in turn create a dynamic and highly unstable platform from which to launch a "reverse discourse" (Spargo, 1999, p. 21). As Sim indicated, "one can not successfully police meaning or history; nor can one offer complete interpretations of them" (Sim, 1999, p. 50.) Using imagery in the classroom as a technological instrument in social constructions of sign and symbol, allow certain language students to better grasp how imagery has come to influence language acquisition. Through this medium, a concern for deconstructing how reality is manufactured can be critically analyzed by language-based instructors and students alike. The co-construction of bridges transcending and traversing two languages can then become an exhilarating experience for both facilitator and student.

Vygotskian Image-based Language Acquisition

The 1900's Industrial Age morphed into the Technological Age, and certain key inventions served as markers for change. Photography has been such an integral part of the post-modernization process that we now routinely use words like "focus", "lens", "develop", "frame", and "filter" to describe elements of our thought processes. The camera and its offspring, the video cam, have become a prime source for information gathering and have, in turn, served to shape the way in which televisuals have been employed to alter and recast public opinion. This phenomenon underscores the steady technological growth and sophistication of contemporary image-making when compared to its initial appearance in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Exactly one hundred years elapsed between the first appearance of a photograph and the release of *The Psychology of Art* in 1925, penned by the Russian scholar, psychologist, artist, and researcher Lev S. Vygotsky. That year marked the release of Vygotsky's study of the processes by which imagery engages and transforms people-- a task to which he had applied himself from 1915 to 1922. Vygotsky's post-doctoral work resulted in his decade-long search dedicated to the study of the production, criticism, history, and aesthetics of art, which in turn became an early but seminal piece in the development of a fresh perspective in the field of psychology.

Reflective of his wide range of interests and intellectual aptitudes, Vygotsky sought to link issues from disciplines traditionally thought to be mutually exclusive. He saw commonalities among the arts, science, physiology, economics, psychology, and other such fields while providing critiques of established educational belief systems.

In this respect, Vygotsky employed a form of post-Hegelian dialectics as a way to insure a high level of dynamism in the pursuit of knowledge-- a knowledge that, in Vygotskian terms, is unachievable without locating oneself within the woven fabric of the social mind (Vygotsky, 1925).

In this pursuit, the organization of stimuli has been deliberately arranged by the facilitator to elicit an aesthetic reaction from the viewer (Vygotsky, 1925). This aesthetic reaction is not to be confused with the Cartesian belief that the form of the imagery alone is sufficiently imbued with a static, universal power capable of delivering an irrefutable Truth to the viewer. In the words of Leontiev (1981), “knowledge is not internalized directly, but through the use of psychological tools”. Vygotsky further explained, “what we are unable to understand immediately and directly can be understood in a roundabout way, allegorically” (Vygotsky, 1925).

Transubstantiation (in Vygotskian terminology) is a specific cognitive function that first takes place within the consciousness of the student, but which is then braided with lived-experience to form the co-constructed environment within which new knowledge is formed (Vygotsky, 1925). Reminiscent of Wittgenstein, Wertsch (1991) refers to this semiotic transference as a “socially provided tool kit” indispensable to the process by which tools and aids help develop “streams of internalized language and conceptualized thought that sometimes run parallel and sometimes merge” with those intended by the producer of the imagery (Bruner, 1996, p.7).

Rather than accepting the dichotomous notion that mind and body, intellect and emotion, individual and society are separate entities, Vygotskian principles stress the interconnectedness of all psycho-physiological processes (Vygotsky, 1925). Through

this paradigm, knowledge is not simply a matter of comprehending a fixed understanding of Reality, but rather the keen observation of the complicated interplay of human perceptions, emotions, imagination, and fantasy (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 199). These inner-workings of the social mind involve an integrated approach toward *how* meaning is made. “Since the intellect is nothing but inhibited will, we might possibly think of imagination as inhibited feeling” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 48).

Vygotsky sought to locate phenomena within the parameters of his emerging sociocultural and psychological theories. His leanings indicated a “shift away from formalist, analytical positions-- functionalism, structuralism, and so forth-- toward more phenomenological perspectives” (Banks, in Prosser, 1988, p. 9). In order to show that irrefutable, empirical knowledge was not necessarily sole property of scholars, Vygotsky emphasized that “the psychologist may, at best, reach the stage of analysis; he has absolutely no access to the synthesis of an aesthetic response” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 205). Through this admission, Vygotsky illustrated that “sociocultural approaches are distinguished by the importance they place on cultural variation and its interrelationship with development” (John-Steiner & Panofsky, 1992, p. 247). Vygotsky refuted the notion of Grant-Allen that “aesthetics are those emotions which have freed themselves from association with practical interests” (Grant-Allen, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 247). Rather, Vygotsky “conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1995).

Dewey and Vygotsky's 'Aesthetics' of Constructivism

Occurring simultaneously with the work of Vygotsky came the growth and development of sociology as a recognized, 'scientific' discipline (Harper, 1993). By the time Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art* was first published in 1925, photography had found a strong niche within accepted forms of sociological research methodology (Harper in Prosser, 1998). Much of that acceptability hinged on the perception that photography would form the basis for alleged value-free chronicling of data. Image-based research, through photography, found itself "with one foot in the old traditions," and was considered at the time as a "simple... truth-revealing mechanism" (Edwards, 1992, p. 4).

This 'scientific' approach approximates the Deweyan notion of '*anesthetics*,' in which researchers seek a form of sanitized positivism (Dewey, 1938). Traweek notes that such educators "long passionately for a world without loose ends, without temperament, gender, nationalism... and (seek) extreme cultures of objectivity" (Traweek, 1988, p. 162).

Derry (1996) has indicated that cognitive constructivist research and practice has intended to place the individual under observation within the context of her / his natural environment. Many tradition-based educational researchers who have followed, however, maintain a view of cognition that "lacks the lived-in qualities of intimacy, engagement, conflict, and negotiation. Their view resembles other analytical dichotomies separating interrelated human experiences, such as the separation of thinking from feeling, or the individual from culture" (John-Steiner, 2000, p.195). In this manner, current research

strategies valued by sociolinguistic theorists stand “in opposition to the more traditional reliance on universal cognitive algorithms” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 194).

Imagery as a Constructivist’s Tool

According to Vygotsky, art is “subject to the general law of historical evolution, at least in its substantial parts” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 41). Sociocultural theory holds that “human activities take place in cultural contexts, that they are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can best be understood when investigated in their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Further, communicative networks are formed when “acts of representation are embedded in social practice and rely on socially developed semiotic means. Ecology, history, culture, and family organization play roles in patterning experience and events” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Through this perspective, Vygotsky noted, “formalists fail to understand the final significance of the rules of estrangement... (therefore failing to understand) the psychological significance of the material” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 57). Aspects of estrangement were also extended to encompass the ontogenic, phylogenic and sociocultural aspects of humankind, which are at once the ill effect of inequity and the vehicle for potential psychosocial evolution (Vygotsky, 1925). One’s estranged relationship to oneself-- one’s biologic and / or psychosocial positionality--serves as both an irritant and a healing mechanism in the meaning-making process. Although some Essentialists seek to align themselves with a quick-fix dogma, “there can be no universal schema that adequately represents the dynamic relation between external and internal aspects of development” (John-Steiner & Soubberman, 1978). Students are afforded an

opportunity to lessen academic anxiety by incorporating iconography into projects, presentations, or as a supplement to interpersonal communication.

As participants in contemporary society, we are bombarded, each and every day, with imagery from countless directions. Vygotsky, using the analogy of five trains entering a tunnel with only room for one to exit, has indicated that “the world pours into (a hu)man through the wide opening of a funnel..... thousands of calls, desires, stimuli, etc. enter, but only an infinitesimal part of them is realized and flows out through the tiny opening” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 54). Imagery provides a special impetus for transubstantiation to occur-- a deeply reflective consideration of seemingly disjointed input in need of linguistic re-organization.

In order to accommodate and arrange such stimuli into a cohesive semblance of order, “dialectics surmounts dichotomies by looking at phenomena as synthesis of contradictions” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). “Art”, Vygotsky wrote, “ simultaneously generates in us opposing affects which acts according to the principle of antithesis and sends opposite impulses” (1925, p. 213). Analysis of this process recognizes the need for “an integrative mode of thinking aimed at overcoming the Cartesian ghosts of dualism and dichotomy” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 100). Dialectical processes present “world pictures which balance each other and constantly need modification” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 100). Nowhere is this phenomenon more in evidence than translating one set of concepts from the native tongue to the newly addressed second language.

Image Theory and Language-based Classroom Interactivity

Working, in part, from the principles outlined by pragmatist George Herbert Mead, Vygotsky “believed that thought develops first through interdependence with others and later is internalized” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 188). Creating new knowledge does not occur in a void. “Joint mediated activity is the proper unit of psychological analysis and hence, is inherently socially shared” (Cole, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 192). Although Marx has often been misquoted and misunderstood, Kushner exclaimed, “Marx was right. The smallest indivisible unit is two people, not one” (Kushner, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 64).

Such collaborative ventures have been thoroughly analyzed by Vygotsky, whose conceptualization of the *zone of proximal development* has led to an increased understanding of the positive advancement of learning in a social context. The relationship between peers, between ‘master’ and mentor, or between groups, offers an opportunity for interactive meaning making to occur. In many cases, art acts as the catalyst for a very different form of jointly mediated knowledge building. As a crucial element in the social construction of understanding, “a need arises from time to time to discharge unused energy and give it full reign in order to reestablish our equilibrium with the rest of the world” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 246).

Constructivist language teachers supply the opportunity for “complimentary” collaborators to offer their particular, unique approaches to facilitate deeper cognition. As Vygotsky put it, “initially an emotion is individual and only by means of a work of art

does it become social or generalized” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 242). In this way, photography acts as an important component of the zone of proximal development.

Kozulin emphasizes that “the internalization of social interaction in the construction of knowledge (leads to a) dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes” (Kozulin, 1990, p. 87). This process of internalization of stimuli is not an instantaneous phenomenon. “We may call art a delayed reaction”, wrote Vygotsky (1925, p. 253). “He (Hennequin) is correct in saying that aesthetic emotion does not immediately generate action, that it manifests itself in the change of purpose” (Hennequin referenced in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 250). This ‘change of purpose’, which Vygotsky has identified as a pivotal element in the creative / re-creative process, has its roots firmly planted in psychosocial interaction.

Feldman states that “the purpose of cultural organisms... (is) to organize existing knowledge and to provide the challenge and the context for individual and joint creativity” (Feldman, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 88). This “collective sense-making,” as defined by Weick, “is a need to act in order to think... where shared experience leads to engagement with culture” (Weick, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 193).

Constructivism: Addressing The At-Risk Language Learner

In all probability, any given classroom will contain at least one student who is, for one reason or another, resistant to learning. The process of neutralizing the effects of self-estrangement could conceivably be accomplished through specific techniques, which allow one to be “liberated from the prison of the self” (Bennis & Biederman, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 188). John-Steiner adds, “through collaboration, we can transcend the

constraints of biology, of time, of habit, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the isolated individual” (2000, p. 188). Catharsis allows for the transformation of passion into virtue (Lessing, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), a transition from displeasure to pleasure (Muller, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), healing and purification in the medical sense (Bernay, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), and the appeasement of “affect” (Zeller, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213). It is within these varying locations of the ontogenic, phylogenic and psychosocial self that truly meaningful change can “contribute to the realization of human possibility” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 187).

SECTION THREE:

CO-CONSTRUCTING A NEW LANGUAGE METHODOLOGY

Investigating Contemporary “Best-Practices”

Banks (in Prosser, 1998, p. 19) believes that visual anthropology is more than a pedagogic strategy or a tool to be used in certain fieldwork contexts: “Rather it is an exploration by the visual, through the visual of human sociality, a field of social action which is enacted in planes of time and space, through objects and bodies, landscapes and emotions, as well as thought” (Banks in Prosser, 1998, p. 19). Regarding any possible ‘misunderstandings of purpose’, catharsis through the collaborative process “gives voice to contradictory and dilemmatic aspects of team practice” (Middleton in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 89).

Photography and cinematography have come to the forefront as avenues for transmission of competing ideologies. The scope and sphere of influence of imagery is

now fully global in nature. Photographic iconography, acting as agency for both proactive and counterproductive forms of meaning making, is at the heart of this (relatively) new art form. Image-based research offers an opportunity for practitioners to weigh the merits of a methodology that seeks to better understand the use of photographic technology as a semiotic tool capable of engaging the student and facilitator in a co-constructed comprehension of sign and symbol. It is through this semiotic process that iconographic symbolism is deciphered and the ideological structures that are embedded in the imagery recognized, analyzed, and internalized by the viewer.

Comprehension Hypothesis

Krashen's work in language acquisition notes that canned curriculum, rigid recitation, and constant correction do little to promote bonafide learning. Rather, acquiring a second language can best take place in the same manner as the original acquisition of the Mother Tongue. A child learns his/her original language in a natural progression, rather than through an artificially constructed environment. The result is an expansion of one's lexicon through trial and error, whereupon "gains" far outweigh grammatical or pronunciation errors. As a result, each language learner develops without the debilitating effects of criticism or deficit-based modeling on the part of any given instructor, whether the teacher is a parent or professional instructor. This process is more in keeping with 'whole language' practice, rather than the dissection of language acquisition into artificially conceived segments. On a related note, comprehension is accelerated through input, not merely output, just as students' success hinges more on learning than teaching (Gattegno.)

Student-Centered Pedagogy

The Interlink philosophy, in keeping with current research, places students at the epicenter of the learning process. By relinquishing the most overt forms of control, an instructor paves the way for increased levels of self-esteem as the students relate more closely to their own lived-experience. By eliminating outdated approaches (endless recitation, reams of vocabulary words, or tiresome grammar exercises) each instructor is afforded the opportunity to become a facilitator rather than the Kingpin of a top-down hierarchy. If the desired goal is to produce an “independent learner,” the instructor must recognize that the student is more than an “empty vessel” to be filled with information. Rather, each student is recognized as a Being fully capable of high-functioning skill building, born of one’s own innate intelligence(s).

Stevick’s “Function Identification”

Of the five functions mentioned (cognitive, managerial, goal-orientation, interpersonal, and emotive) the last two are of particular interest to me. All five depend on the transference of the “centrality of power,” but the interpersonal exchange and the corresponding level of enthusiasm generated for the task at hand are particularly difficult to achieve. Stevick notes that it is essential that the instructor help form a stable, micro-world of “meaningful action” in the classroom.

For many American educators such as I, issues related to “humanistic” or “progressive” education conjure up the name of John Dewey. With Dewey in mind, I took note of Stevick’s concern that any given teacher’s desire to secure the growth and development of “the five functions” may very well lead to an “urgent need to see results,” which can unwittingly usher in a “preempting of initiative.” In our desire to fulfill our

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perceived obligation to our students, as well as to Al Yamamah University, we can either “kill with kindness” or “stifle through rigor” our students’ collective ability to self-direct their own learning processes.

As children, many of us have experienced in our own educational pathway the “totality” of the instructor as the alleged cornerstone to the learning process. Once this notion is engrained, it is hard to reverse. Hence, many teachers emulate what they know best—a dictatorial supremacy over the very people who would benefit best from a more communal, shared learning environment. My students may produce a poorly constructed advertisement (for example,) but we must place emphasis on process over product. Polished and professional (or not,) at least the work belongs to the students and they take ownership of their own learning processes.

These must be hard words to swallow for many traditional instructors, as we are often likely to evaluate our own teaching skills in some quantitative manner. This reasoning leads to our own self-evaluation based on how many problems students get correct, which is highly reductionistic and therefore counter-productive to overall student success. As Gallwey states, the “critical self” begins to interfere with the “performing self,” as our desire to achieve is measured not by our small classroom successes but by our students’ errors. In our attempt to win each battle, we unconsciously lose the war. In the end, the students suffer, while the instructor is left to ponder exactly what went off kilter.

LEA and the Group Experience

In the United States, federal legislation ushered in the No Child Left Behind agenda. I personally view this movement to be a detrimental and debilitating step
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backward. Just as Phonics unfairly rewards native speakers of English, the product-oriented goal of “teaching to the test” does a great disservice to our collective student clientele.

In particular, whole language strategies, multiculturalism, and process-based instruction are the bane of NCLB devotees. This current pedagogical trend de-contextualizes the learning process, as a myriad of particulates (“knowledge bytes”) shower down on the learner. This deluge finally washes away any chance of putting each byte into a larger, more meaningful context. We often refer to the second-language learner as “submerged” in a hopeless onslaught of random facts. In my country, a massive number of students drop out, or are “pushed out” by an impersonal educational machine to which certain students simply cannot relate.

Marcia Taylor offers the antidote to NCLB. By placing the learner’s cultural and personal experience into the forefront of the educational process, the students’ own meaning-making processes are allowed to take root and flourish. LEA “promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experience and oral language,” which can only help but boost levels of interest and promote success in the classroom. When implemented properly, this approach should increase each student’s love of learning and promote the natural urge to investigate further the subject at hand.

Krashen and Terrell have found that reading (for instance) should be comprehensible and interesting if we are to achieve student “buy-in.” If I, as teacher, apply my own cultural and educational ideology and suppress or minimize my students’ personal, cultural experience can I expect to sustain the interest of my second language learners? They may, out of respect, work with me for a while. In the end, I can expect

them, one by one, to lose interest in exercises that have no relationship with their own personal identity.

If we, on the other hand, seek to broaden our own cultural understandings, we can engage each student in his personal quest for self-discovery. In this scenario, the instructor can participate in the learning process as well: acting as both an agent for educational advancement for one's students and as a learner himself. In so doing, the instructor can transfer the power that comes with his status without sacrificing the level of respect that he inherits through his "job description" as group "leader." In time, if performed properly, this transfer of power can reap great rewards for both student and instructor. Taylor's writings outline seven targeted aspects of "the Group Experience," which then breaks down into ten more techniques and exercises. Her techniques have all the earmarks of sound pedagogy, as they revolve around each student's process of self-discovery. This system of delivery places the student at the center of classroom activity, while "forming the bridge to reading and writing independently."

To create an atmosphere whereby students become "independent learners" is, after all, the main goal of the Interlink philosophy.

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