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GAZING AT THE BODY AS A LOCUS OF COMPETENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

It is well-established that the notion of language competence often bandied about in English language teaching scholarship owes much of its allegiance to the Chomskyan tradition, which privileges mind over body and other materiality. Tracing this tradition to its root, one may surmise that the infamous Chomskyan competence has been the sustenance of Cartesian linguistics as the Neo-Platonic philosophical tradition known for its condemnatory arguments against body in the pursuit of knowledge. Basing on the idea of somaesthetics initially proposed by Richard Shusterman, I argue in this conceptual article that English language teaching landscape needs to embrace insights generated by current research and theorization on the pivotal role of the *soma* (the living body) as a source of competence in facilitating communicative practices. I will first discuss the notion of somaesthetic, and then demonstrate that research in language teaching and language acquisition scholarship (albeit limited in numbers) has long been inspired by this body philosophy. Implications for English language teaching will be offered.

Keywords: Chomskyan tradition, communicative practices, language competence, somaesthetics, soma

Introduction

In English language education, the extolled notion of language competence has indubitably been associated with the Chomskyan linguistics as the epitome of the 'cognitive revolution' (Atkinson, 2012). Competence, conceived from this school of thought, is a mental grammar and a product of creative mental processes generated *ad infinitum* by the mind. It is therefore individualistic, rationalistic, abstract, and logocentric. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Chomsky (1965) that has constituted the *locus classicus* of modern linguistic theory:

> "Any interesting generative grammar will be dealing, for the most part, with mental processes that are far beyond the level of actual or even potential consciousness; futhermore, it is quite apparent that a speaker's reports and viewpoints about his behavior and his

> competency may be in error. Thus, a generative grammar attempts to specify what the speaker actually knows, not what he may report about his knowledge (p. 8).

The powerful ramifications of this contention which have been feverishly embraced in English language pedagogy include the followings:

- Competence is a key construct, and performance is subservient to competence (hence the dichotomy competence vs. performance)
- Language resides *in intellectu* (solitary mental activity)
- Language is a pre-given entity
- There exists an idealized native speaker

Tracing its very root of this idea of language competence, one can arguably link it to its lineage –Platonic philosophical tradition, which elevates the status of mind (competence or knowledge of language) as a source of knowledge, and relegates the body (performance or use of language) as distorting the pursuit of knowledge. Because of the predominant influence of the Chomskyan tradition in English language teaching, competence in the English language is construed as the ability to produce (to speak and write) language which approximates English native speakers at best, and precisely sounds like them at worst.

Competence in this Chomskyan sense has been prevalent, most notably in the mainstream second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) scholarship (see Atkinson, 2010). Long's oft-cited (1997) assertion that "Most SLA researchers view the object of inquiry as in large part an internal, mental process: the acquisition of new (linguistic) knowledge" (p. 319) reflects the Chomskyan orientation to language as mental grammar. That is, language is considered autonomous or self-standing (Canagarajah, 2018 b), devoid of its socio-cultural forces. Furthermore, this orientation treats mind and world as separated (Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, & Okada, 2007). So dominant is this orientation in SLA scholarship that SLA research has clung to the 'linguistic cognitive paradigm' (Ortega, 2014) as their conceptual framework.

This conceptual article argues that as language education has focused almost exclusively on competence as an abstract and mentalistic entity (hence the predominance of linguistic cognitive paradigm), there is the need for language education to consider body as a key locus of language competence. Drawing on the idea of somaesthetic or body consciousness proposed by Shusterman (2008), the article shows that (based on current research and theorization in English language education), the body can serve as a vital site and locus of meaning making, which in the end can enable language users to achieve successful communication. The article concludes by offering implications for English language education.

Theory and Application

Gazing at the Body: A Perspective from Somaestethics

Among the many argumentations proposed by the body theorists and philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir, amongst others (for a comprehensive review and critiques of the works of these body philosophers, readers are referred to Shusterman (2008)), Richard Shusterman is probably the one who has taken a further step to elevate the relegating status of body and to defend it against the Neo-platonic critiques of the bodily values. Not only has he been attempting to vehemently resuscitating the vital role of the soma (the living body), but he has also been calling for more attention to the study of somaesthetics defined "as the

critical meliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19). The interchangeable use of the notions of soma and body throughout the article is intentional, but both refer essentially to the meaning as living, sentient body rather than body as a mere object. They are meant to be *Leib* and not *Körper* to use the German terms. It is important to highlight here that by the phrase 'critical meliorative study', Shusterman wishes to emphasize the practical sides of somatic philosophy, namely the capability of "both in stylizing one's self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things (Shusterman, 2008, p. 2).

This philosophical outlook of the living body certainly carries relevant bearings to the way body can (re)construct and (re) produce knowledge –the contention that has been inveighed against by the Neo-platonic tradition. For Shusterman, the body forms a vital dimension of our identity, for it functions as the instrumental medium of our perception in understanding the world. As he remarks:

> It (*the body*) [italics mine] forms our primal perspective or mode of engagement with the world, determining (often unconscious) our choice of ends and means by structuring the very needs, habits, interests, pleasures, and capacities on which those ends and means rely for their significance (Shusterman, 2008, p. 3).

This remark can only be understood if we cling to the idea of somaesthetics as something practical (hence *practical somaesthetics*), rather than as something abstract, and mere theoretical or concpetual. In fact, among the other branches of somaesthetics adumbrated by Shusterman, it is practical somaesthetics that constitutes a key premise in his body philosophy. Somaesthetics in this perspective is then "Concerned not with saying but with *doing* [italic in original]…" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 29). Aside from practical somaesthetics, Shusterman (2008) also mentions other types of somaesthetics which include *analytic* somaesthetics and *pragmatic* somaesthetics. The former deals with the descriptive and theoretical aspects of bodily perceptions and practices, and the latter is concerned with the normative and prescriptive characters of the body and various methods used to enhance somatic improvement.

Many body scholars have, in fact, applied somatic practices in formal education like in dance education (Bresler, 2004; Stinson, 2004), art education (Davidson, 2004), and music education (Bowman, 2004) with the aim of demonstrating the possibility of bodily instruction in the school curricula and of emphasizing the innumerable values of embodied pedagogies. More importantly, the inclusion of the formal bodily instruction reflects an intellectual endeavor to fill the void of the absence of embodied knowledge in educational institutions (Bresler, 2004).

Although Shusterman (2008) does not explicitly accentuate the role of the soma as a locus of language competence, we can nevertheless expand this practical aspect of somaesthetics to the way linguistic knowledge is (re) constructed and (re) produced in any communicative setting. As we will see in the subsequent section, the expansion of bodily role in meaning-making is often accompanied with the notions bearing such names as alignment and assemblage. This accompaniment, it should be noted, does not by any means, render the notion of somaesthetics less significant in its role as the prime locus of language competence.

Body as a Locus of Competence: Evidence from Several Studies

Scholars in language education in general, and SLA in particular have become increasingly cognizant of the vital role of the body as a potential locus of meaning making in communicative

events (see Atkinson, 2014; Atkinson, et.al, 2007; Canagarajah, 2018 a; Canagarajah, 2018 b; Nishino & Atkinson, 2014, amongst others). Although in their studies and theorization these scholars do not specifically attribute body as the sole entity contributing to meaning making, they do acknowledge it as a site where competence resides. Aside from the acknowledgements of both bodily and cognitive competence, scholars have been attempting to show an integrated, expansive and embodied perspective of SLA and language education in general by embracing an assemblage of socio-material worlds and spaces, an emerging paradigm that has radically shifted the traditional cognitivist SLA to a more social-material-oriented SLA. In light with the latter orientation, various SLA studies (and English language studies as well) have ensued, bearing various names such as sociocognitive approach (Atkinson, 2014; Atkinson, et.al, 2007), sociocognitive alignment (Nishino & Atkinson, 2014), spatial repertoires (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Canagarajah, 2018 a), new materialism (Canagarajah 2018 c; see also Kim & Canagarajah, 2021).

Atkinson, et.al (2007) investigated the acquisition of English grammatical constructions by a high school student tutored by her aunty, attempting to find out what external factors, apart from cognitive attributes, could contribute to the acquisition of these constructions. In their study, they showed that their research participants named Ako (a high school student) and Tomo (Ako's aunt) exhibited a dynamic coordination and alignment with socio-material worlds in the former's attempt to acquire English grammatical constructions. This coordination is not limited to the mind as a source of knowledge, but to the bodily orientations and other materiality, such as books, tables, chairs, pen, and other worlds' materiality. The results of this study demonstrated that language acquisition and language learning are a convoluted process encompassing a multidimensional alignment with "a rich array of sociocognitive tools and affordances" (p. 184), the most part of which includes a bodily dimension.

In another study, Nishino and Atkinso (2015) further applied the sociocognitive theoretical framework to second language writing, suggesting that language production (i.e. academic writing in this case) is intricately embedded with sociomaterial environment such as bodies and other semiotic systems. In other words, writing, as they argue, is "co-constructed social activity rather than a solitary cognitive act" (p. 40). Applying the sociocognitive paradigm in how two Japanese writers (Tomo and Masa) jointly composed an academic prose, the authors found out that writing activities of these two participants are inseparable from "mind-body-world ecologies" (Nishino & Atkinso, 2015, p. 39). An intricate web of multidimensional facets is involved in the writing activities and potentially contributes to the meaning making during the process of writing. From this perspective, cognition is seen not as an "independent category", but as an "*emergent result of and tool for*" [italics in original] integrated mind-body-world activity (Nishino & Atkinso, 2015, p. 51).

A study of embodied cognition related to the mind-body-space has been insightfully conducted by Canagarajah (2018 b). Using interview data elicited from the Chinese STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) scholars, Canagarajah has revealingly shown that language competence claimed by these scholars in the interview data are the results of their strategic alignment with the surrounding spaces, multimodal resources and other material affordances. For example, rather than claiming the value of verbal resources and proficiency, the interviewees in the study attribute their competence as a result of their relying on the body language or gestures and visuals such as images and pictures in formal classroom presentation. Obviously, the notion of competence in this sense stands in stark contrast with that construed by the Chomskyan paradigm as purely cognitive and mentalistic in nature. From this contemporary perspective, competence is redefined in light of one's creative communicative strategies of

assembling one's self with different kinds of material objects and entities distributed within certain spaces, with both the entities and spaces playing a pivotal role in meaning making (see also Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Canagarajah, 2018 a).

While all of these studies integrate cognition with body, material worlds, semiotic resources, and spaces, all of which constitute an assemblage, we can argue here that it is the body that still serves as the key locus of competence; materials, semiotic resources and spaces, albeit crucial, only play a subservient role in contributing to meaning. They are made 'alive' through the enactment of the consciousness of the soma or living body, without which these facets will be of little value. It is the body (through the sensory-perception) that controls and governs the inanimate materials by imbuing them with agentive capacities to 'act' and 'intra-act.' Consider, for example, an elementary school learner (Picture 1 below) who is concentrating on doing her homework. As can be seen here, learning is inextricably ecologically embedded and entangled. The material objects such as the computer, the mouse, the keyboard and the books are assembled, made alive, and hence gaining functionality due the learner's consciousness of using the body parts in infusing agentive capacities to these objects. As such, thinking and understanding (i.e. the cognitive part) of the lesson assigned as homework is further enhanced by the alignment and assemblage of these different inanimate entities.

The human-non human interaction here constitutes what Clark (2001) calls "the whole caboodle"…: the brain and body operating within an environmental setting (p. 142). The product of comprehending what is being learnt is therefore not solely due the functionality of the brain, but because of the continual and repeated assemblage of mind and socio-material worlds. This product, as Clark (2001) further contends, is as result of "…the embodied, embedded agent in the world. The naked biological brain is just a part (albeit a crucial and special part) of a spatiality and temporally extended process, involving lots of extraneural operations, whose joint action creates the intellectual product (p. 142).



Picture 1. An elementary learner is doing her school assignment

Conclusion

The shifting orientation of SLA from the purely linguistic cognitive paradigm to socio-material-cognitive orientation certainly has far-reaching implications for language education as well as language learning. First, language learning and teaching are always ecologically embodied and entangled within complex and convoluted multidimensional facets. As every facet is always in alignment resulting in an assemblage of different material affordances, it is getting difficult to determine that mind/brain alone is the sole locus of language competence. There are cases where

verbal resources (as a product of cognitive competence) alone are of little help in enhancing communication, and must therefore be aligned with other multimodal resources, materiality and space (hence spatial repertoires), so as to effectively attain communicative goals (see for example Canagarajah, 2018b, 2018c).

Second, the role of body aesthetics in entanglement and alignment with other semiotic resources, spaces, and material affordances need to receive considerable attention by language teachers. As has been demonstrated in the studies reviewed above, the body as the core source of competence immensely contributes to meanings in communicative settings by infusing the agentive capacities to inanimate entities, therefore making these entities gain functionality. Similarly, body as an individual living entity autonomous from other entities has nonlinguistic and non-propositional 'bodily knowledge'– 'as a way of knowing the world through the tactile-kinesthetic experience of our bodies' (Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 93). This is the 'corporeality of knowledge' which is not "mobilized on the basis of reasons, concepts, thoughts, analysis, and arguments (Sousa Santos, 2018, P. 97). Given the importance of this body aesthetics, what language teachers and students need to be cognizant of is the consciousness of the body as the key locus of all perception.

Finally, the radical paradigmatic shift in orientation in SLA and language education compels us language teachers to equip students not only with language awareness and rhetorical differences across languages, but also with strategic communicative practices. Contrary to the linguistic cognitive paradigm where native like proficiency has been seen as the ultimate goal of language acquisition, the goal of language education under the new SLA orientation should no longer be the attainment of proficiency of the standard variety *per se*. As Pennycook (2014) has argued, the goal of language education, "may be less towards proficient native speakers…, and to think instead in polycentric terms of *resourceful speakers*" (p. 15) [italics in original]. In other words, it is speakers' resourcefulness in aligning themselves with the ecological affordances and in creatively assembling these affordances that language education must aim at.

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