

CHILDREN'S MEANING-MAKING PROCESS TO ENGLISH LEARNING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to gather findings regarding children's meaning-making process while learning English, targeting pedagogical practices in favor of this approach. Three keywords were adopted: "meaning-making process," "bilingual children," and "English language learners (ELL)." Ten references were included, nine from the United States (US). The learners were supposed to have previous experience with another language, and Spanish was the most cited. The results point to translanguaging as a trend. Emergent bilinguals, minority, and majority languages are cited as suitable terms, while ELL and others should become obsolete. Future studies could exclude results from the US to capture different learning environments.

Keywords: child education, language learning, socio-historical-cultural theory.

1 Introduction

As the fallacies of bilingualism are refuted based on scientific arguments, not only the population opens up to a broader linguistic repertoire, but there is also an improvement in teachers' education based on the demand and, therefore, more appropriate learning conditions for students. Based on facts, laypeople and the scientific community are now able to understand learning languages is possible at any age once certain aspects are taken into consideration towards the quality of this education. For instance, suitable input influences learners' output, and even at early ages, children can benefit from multilingual contexts³. Vygotsky (2012) asserts that the biological and individual traces are not the

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³ We suggest Blos (2009) for more details regarding advantages learners can experience by comparing languages and transferring knowledge mutually.

only ones responsible for learning and development since the social environment constitutes support to make meaning to the surroundings (academic or daily life elements).

Grounded on the author (2012) and its Socio-Historical-Cultural theory, this paper aims to provide a state of the art about how children relate to English while learning the language and to contribute as a guidance to pedagogical practices in line with the students' needs. When students attribute meaning to what is being taught, they tend to experience more motivation to learn because they can see a connection between previous and upcoming knowledge linked to their reality. Believing students can experience their development while exploring meaning making process in their daily routine, this research is carried out to collect evidence that support this sort of pedagogical practices.

2 Method

This paper consists of a systematic review performed through Google Scholar. It gathers the ten first references found while searching for “meaning-making process,” “bilingual children,” and “English language learners (ELL)”, in this order. Authors choice of keywords was based on the objective of this paper and the number of references taken into consideration was limited for time management. After generating a list of results, the documents were skimmed, and special attention was given to the titles and abstracts. We thought analyzing dissertations and theses of any kind (to obtain a Master's or a Ph.D.) would not be tangible to the present research due to their extension, broader and deeper reflections when compared to articles and chapters, which are the types of references we decided to include based on the possibilities of this research (eg. limitation of time). To be considered part of this study, the references were necessarily focused on children, and one article was excluded for this reason. Also, texts had to be available at no cost, criteria that forced us to keep a series of articles and chapters out of the corpus.

Systematic reviews enable an understanding of the current research situation regarding a specific subject, as to point to the main achievements and to the needs that further studies should cover (SWALES; FEAK, 2012). Besides that, we conducted a brief historical investigation by adding no restriction to the year of publication. The idea is to discuss how children have experienced learning English over the years as a Cultural-Historical phenomenon and to what extent they have been able to make meaning of this

activity (VYGOTSKY, 2012). As we were aware, this was a relatively recent topic of investigation, we were not concerned about findings dating from a remote time, and our expectations were confirmed. The oldest reference included in this analysis was published slightly over a decade ago (RAZFAR; KHISTY; CHVAL, 2011).

3 Literature review

We initiate by presenting objective data, unquestionable information given by each author, for instance, the country of origin of the references: 9 studies (BROWN; ALLMOND, 2021; CLARK, 2020; MARTÍNEZ-ROLDÁN, 2015; HU; LIU; ZHENG, 2018; PARK; KIM, 2016; POZA, 2018; SOLTERO-GONZÁLEZ; REYES, 2012; RAZFAR; KHISTY; CHVAL, 2011; WILLEY; MORALES, 2021) developed in the United States (US) and 1 (ÜNSAL et al, 2018) in Sweden. All of them were empirical research, nine written in article format and one as a book chapter. The year of publication varied from 2011 to 2021, 6 of them being from the last five years. The education stage oscillated between early childhood education - ECE (2 references) and elementary schools (7), plus 1 study that compiled data from an institution offering both. The age among the ECE children was from 2 to 5 years old, whereas the others were between 8 and 12 years old.

Children's data were generated while they were attending regular school hours (4 references), extra-academic activities (4), at home (1), and in all of the conditions previously cited (1). The last study was initially planned to compare the meaning-making process at home versus at school, and because one child was enrolled in lab classes, this scenario was included as well. Besides the lab classes, the extra-academic activities found in the scrutinized literature (9 articles and one book chapter) were language programs (focusing on English as a majority or a minority language and science clubs).

Regarding the languages involved, children were inserted in an environment that led them to learn English in addition to one other language they formerly knew or simultaneously got in contact with. We designate the latter as the minority language, a concept that will be described later in this paper and is anchored by one of our target references (ÜNSAL et al., 2018). Spanish was fairly the most cited minority language (6 times) due to the country of origin of the papers and its location - to be more explicit, the US border with Mexico and the remarkable migration movements that have been

observed for many years now. In the second position, Tagalog was registered twice. Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, Russian, and Somali were mentioned once each. The counting considers the number of references citing users of these minority languages. Some studies had more than a single minority language (for example, Ünsal et al., 2018), which explains why more languages are in focus than articles/chapters. On the other hand, Martínez-Roldán (2015) researched several children with a common language. Still, the minority language was enumerated only once per publication (this situation happened with more authors, we chose one to exemplify).

The other elements observed in our corpus are part of what we could name as subjective data. These elements are not merely represented by numbers but deserve contextual analysis and could even be considered questionable arguments, facing criticism and controversies. While scanning our corpus, some issues were being consulted more frequently than others. We agreed on the relevance of those issues quoted at least five times. The initial element was the *theoretical or conceptual framework* adopted by the authors to achieve the established objectives (mainly the language learning processes). When choosing “meaning-making process” as a keyword, one could not expect any different theory than the socio-cultural (or cultural-historic) as the most cited. Apart from Park and Kim (2016), it was unanimous among the other 9 references as the core foundation. In fact, Park and Kim (2016) did not write about the theory itself or about Vygotsky; however, it is possible to notice their affiliation to this perspective mainly while reading Kim’s short biography (she introduces sociocultural theory in language learning as one of her research focuses).

Considering the authors’ broad input on Vygotsky’s theory, the following lines represent a few of the main contributions. Soltero-González and Reyes (2012) defend biliteracy development from a sociocultural perspective, which Clark (2020) specifies as an approach based on the manner literacy practices children face in their lives implicate in their participation as experts, novices or eager observers. For Brown and Allmond (2021) sociocultural literacies could be defined by how background experiences and interactive processes give meaning to events. In other words, they consider languages as avenues that enable walking beyond past experiences and expanding communicative functions or modes. In respect to this, Martínez-Roldán (2015) advocates for the closeness between individuals and the society, concluding that language learning is

embedded in social practices rather than in a cognitive, linear, and individual process.

Narrowing down, Willey and Morales (2021) cite Razfar, Khisty and Chval (2011) to discuss the Social-cultural Theory (SCT) for language development in mathematics classrooms and the research circumstances they share references are part of the corpus of this review, the latter explores the issue in detail proposing a comparison between the zone of proximal development (ZPD) from SCT and comprehensible input from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) models. This juxtaposition will be presented later on, when we dedicate this review to discuss terminology of the languages involved in the educational contexts. For now, we would like to refer to Hu, Liu, and Zheng (2018) as another example of a study detailing ZPD, a zone represented by the distance between the current possibilities a child has to perform activities by themselves and its future potential abilities, the most experienced ones being ultimate pieces towards these new possibilities. Teachers, parents, adults in general, and even children could offer guidance along this path, a temporary help that will no longer be necessary someday. These people would act as support from a more experienced peer to a less, a mechanism named by Vygotsky as scaffolding.

Multimodality was the second most frequent subject in the subjective data (6 citations) and it was explained by Soltero-González and Reyes (2012) as part of literacy practices that should rely on several symbolic systems along with the written forms (such as drawing, drama, music, movement and talk). Razfar, Khisty and Chval (2011) verified a multimodal approach to mathematics in a classroom where the teacher was not restricting her activities to language exercises. They noticed she attributed epistemic identities, changed norms of participation and dialogue, for example, by including abstract symbolizing such as calculator keystrokes and writing mathematical explanations. This perspective was further reassured and expanded with García (2009 apud POZA, 2018) to explain the multimodality of translanguaging as a communication that alternates between words, images and from one language to another.

Translanguaging, that appeared associated with multimodality, happens to be in the third place with biliteracy, each of them covered by half of the references. Starting with *translanguaging*, its definition was commonly brought into consideration based on García and/or Wei, as partners or independent writers. Codeswitching is considered the preceding understanding of bilingual brains and how they function by alternating from

one language repertoire to another (WEI, 2015 apud POZA, 2018). Nowadays, the term translanguaging introduces the idea of integration between combined languages, turning them into a single linguistic repertoire that can no longer be understood apart or with boundaries (GARCÍA, 2011 apud ÜNSAL et al, 2018; GARCÍA; WEI, 2014 apud MARTÍNEZ-ROLDÁN, 2015; GARCÍA; WEI, 2014 apud CLARK, 2020; GARCÍA; JOHNSON; SELTZER, 2017 apud WILLEY; MORALES, 2021).

García and Wei (2014 apud MARTÍNEZ-ROLDÁN, 2015) continue this explanation by recalling that the monolingual perspective would keep on defining them as two separated and independent languages. However, the ongoing bilingual theory challenges the view of bilinguals as parallel monolinguals. It posits the individual that communicates in more languages as different and with broader possibilities than the summation of two people speaking one language each. These possibilities escape from target forms and standardized discourses, they are flexible and vary in accordance to one's strategic choices (WEI, 2015 apud POZA, 2018; GARCÍA; WEI, 2014 apud CLARK, 2020; GARCÍA, 2009 apud ÜNSAL et al, 2018).

Bilinguals have the potential to engage in multiple discursive practices in order to make sense of the world (GARCÍA, 2009 apud ÜNSAL et al, 2018). This advantage supports meaning making processes (WEI, 2015 apud POZA, 2018) and enables active participation in class (GARCÍA; WEI, 2014 apud CLARK, 2020). Therefore, translanguaging becomes a matter of fighting against hierarchical social structures (POZA, 2018) and supporting students' bilingual identities contrary to English only ideologies and its hegemony (MARTÍNEZ-ROLDÁN, 2015; WILLEY; MORALES, 2021).

The battle of the minority languages versus English is historic and it is not over yet. Martínez-Roldán (2015) analyzed classrooms where Spanish, English and translanguaging were allowed, teachers and students were able to communicate in both, but there was no established policy to distribute the languages nor a protected space for each. Some tensions and dilemmas were registered when the researcher noticed the bilingual teacher candidates (TC) privileged the use of English, especially when giving instructions to the students. A hypothesis proposed the TC conception of themselves still as English teachers, avoiding their welcoming and reinforcing attitude towards the bilingual repertoire children (Latinos, Spanish speakers) were initially expected to

exercise.

Biliteracy also represented an important concept in our review and was part of the debate of 5 productions. One of the possible definitions of the term is to refer to students engaged in the process of developing two or more languages concomitantly (BAUER et al, 2017; GARCÍA; KLEIFGEN, 2018 apud BROWN; ALLMOND, 2021). Dual language programs are an example of a situation where bilingualism is fostered, as well as equity among the repertoires (MARTÍNEZ-ROLDÁN, 2015). In our corpus, we often found examples of schools approaching English and Spanish, but we could not recognize explicit rules regarding the distribution of languages. There was also a case of screen-based literacies development for ELL⁴, a pedagogical practice concerned about the importance of computer-based literacy resources.

Traditional literacy curricula tend to neglect the rich backgrounds bilingual students carry even as very young children. It ends up privileging monolingualism because its practices ignore cultural and linguistic diversity (SOLTERO-GONZÁLEZ; REYES, 2012). On the other hand, Brown and Allmond (2021) observe that by exploring the unique experiences bilinguals gather, teachers can build bridges connecting current abilities to potential ones to help students to make meaning. Translanguaging could be a crucial element of this engagement, by switching languages or diving into creative upcoming forms of communication.

Martínez-Roldán (2015) understands that this critical change is a matter of time. She identified teachers progressively engaging in practices in favor of bilingualism and biliteracy along the years, increasing their emphasis on students' both languages as they get more experienced. The history of language learning and teaching is in a constant movement itself and *terms employed to designate the learning process and the involved languages* in use deserve to be inserted in the debate.

The participants of the target studies were engaged in learning English somehow. The intent behind choosing ELL as a keyword was to escape from the bias some concepts related to the learning contexts may arise, proposing a general perception of the topic. For instance, it was not our purpose to exclusively cover the reality of those learning another language in a country where there would rarely be an opportunity to use

⁴ We agreed on repeating the concept of ELL to respect the conception adopted by the referred authors. Our point of view about how to name these learners is discussed in the following paragraphs.

the language apart from the classroom, such as in a daily conversation (an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) angle). Also, the interest was not to focus on a language being learned in schools from a community where it is used along the routine, herewith the maintenance of a mother language (an English as a Second Language (ESL) interpretation).

ELL was not only one of the keywords to run this systematic review, but also the comprehension of the first (HU; LIU; ZHENG, 2018) and the last (PARK; KIM, 2016) articles, without further explanation or discussion. Even though ELL remains in use in Razfar, Khisty and Chval (2011), a new perspective seems to emerge - a transitional approach considering SLA's limitations. Similarly to our concerns, the authors (2011) demonstrate the cons of the latter model itself, although they still refer to English as a second language - a term we prefer to substitute by majority language founded on Ünsal et al (2018).

Razfar, Khisty and Chval (2011) criticize Krashen's and Cummins' models as nativist assumptions characterizing the mind as genetically predisposed to acquire new languages instead of learning. Limitations are recognized by them based on evidence that demonstrates the importance of social mediation, of considering the language as a means rather than an end in the learning process, and of an active position in order to develop language skills. The beliefs on individual traits and universal trajectories of development would rather be abandoned to boost the social aspects.

But there is a perception of Cummins' as a more integrated understanding if compared to Krashen's, avoiding the boundaries among languages in the human brain and the educational processes. Cummins' is pointed as a model capable of distinguishing contexts embedded in languages and those detached academic scenarios, supporting Razfar, Khisty and Chval (2011) thoughts about SLA limitations.

Throughout the present review not only the SLA model or ESL and EFL parameters had to be rethought but, paradoxically, ELL ideals as well. The arguments of Soltero-González and Reyes (2012), Poza (2018), Brown and Allmond (2021), Clark (2020), Martínez-Roldán (2015) and Willey and Morales (2021) promoting the substitution of ELL by emergent bilinguals (EB) surpassed our expectations.

Poza (2018) and Clark (2020) register their preference for the name EB in footnotes. The first author justifies this for the purpose of avoiding attention to the

unknown, to empower the student. The second details three descriptions or reasons why we should call children in this manner: because they are exposed to a language other than English while growing; they have been designated as EL at school; and their bilingualism is still and continuously in progress.

Soltero-González and Reyes (2012) clarify the choice as in line with the bilingual perspective, to boost children's potential to discover new languages based on and with no substitution to previous ones. For Brown and Allmond (2021), prior terms like English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) were moving to the opposite direction, marginalizing the linguistic diversity and reinforcing the hegemony of English. Ultimately, Martínez-Roldán (2015) registered TC practices overestimating English due to pressures of the school districts, personal beliefs and the evaluation systems.

EB seems to describe this population accordingly, whereas a denomination for the languages in use is lacking. Following our preceding indication, we would like to explain the embracing of vocabularies manifested by Ünsal et al (2018) to fill this gap. They state that mother tongue, first language, second language and additional language are categorizations from a monolingual method that should be replaced by minority and majority language. In this study, for example, we carefully referred to Spanish as a minority language for some times and to English as a majority one. It is important to notice languages may represent major or minor use according to the local circumstances.

As a final element, we combine the *conclusions driven by the authors* regarding children's meaning making process. One of the first concerns teachers usually demonstrate about children enrolled in bilingual programs is the minority language and how to avoid it. Soltero-González and Reyes (2012) brought evidence on the positive interference between languages. At this school, the Latino students' use of Spanish contributed to their English knowledge. When allowed to do so, children's language repertoire gave them the opportunity to make new connections and reinforce older ones, culminating with a well-established meaning making process. Brown and Allmond (2021) explain no success could be registered for bilinguals in English-only classrooms. They attribute this failure to neglecting and marginalizing existing student resources.

To explain it differently, these are arguments for translanguaging practices as key to make meaning. Poza (2018) sustains that students and teachers create opportunities to overcome the language separation policies by rejecting them. Teachers can contribute

through explicit support of linguistic flexibility, building collaboration spaces to encourage students' full bilingual repertoire. Clark (2020) suggests practices and materials with potential to discuss sociocultural knowledge and bilingual experiences as a path to reinforce diverse cultural and linguistic schemas. For these students, attending classes that are interested in such debates is a chance to share their lives authentically and spontaneously. Monolinguals would also take advantage of these moments to expand ideas.

Poza (2018) underlines that translanguaging is not inherited from SLA, so it has to consider multilinguals' languaging as a standard behavior rather than a deviation from monolingual paradigms. In that sense, Martínez-Roldán (2015) alerts that the translanguaging pedagogies implementation is delicate. Though some TC could not detach from their stigmatized role as English teachers, the author concluded that the studied bilingual after-school program clearly benefited children, offering them the chance to speak Spanish. The limitation of the classes was to be planned without specific teaching strategies or designed spaces for translanguaging.

Razfar, Khisty, and Chval (2011) believe SCT lenses can help facing these issues if teachers promote meaning-making construction through problem-oriented activities, multiple mediational tools, emphasis on discourse, and on the interaction of all students in all languages. Hu, Liu, and Zheng (2018) highlight picture books as a relevant strategy too, because children actively build bridges between themselves and the text, establishing connections in order to make sense of the pictures. In fact, these authors (2018) affirm reading wordless books can require more effort than a book with text; however the benefits make it worth it.

Particularly, Willey and Morales (2021) exemplify the importance of linguistically rich environments to teach mathematics. They also raise another extremely important gain: parents' participation. If the minority language is allowed at school, adults who feel more comfortable using it instead of the major can be more present in their children's education. Equivalently, Unsal et al (2018) affirms minority languages can increase learning opportunities in science classes. Park and Kim (2016) advocate for computer-based texts to engage in imagined or real dialogues with others, themselves and texts. The nonlinear nature of these texts creates conditions for several reading strategies and brings the reader closer to the content. These practices and the theory help us grasp

and illustrate ongoing meaning making processes children face while learning English. Not simply as ELL. EB are rightful human beings that deserve to be welcomed and educated in their integrity, at their full capacities.

4 Conclusions

The present systematic review aimed to comprehend the current status of literature regarding children learning English and the possibilities the students are offered to make meaning along this educational process. This understanding helps boosting pedagogical practices aligned with the Socio-Historical-Cultural Theory. Straightforward information as well as subjective data from 10 references were generated and correlated. Translanguaging appears as a trend, an ultimate practice that bilingual programs should adopt and think about carefully to escape from hegemonic languages.

The criteria to select the corpus allowed not only the most recent publications to be part of the study but by including older ones we could describe some historical aspects of the topic, drawing a panorama of its development. Denominations that have been adopted to refer to the languages in use and to the educational purpose were reviewed. Despite our attentiveness while scrutinizing keywords before deciding which to use, the traced investigation regarding the concepts leads to a recommendation of substitution. The writings elucidated the prevalence of EB and minority and majority languages as suitable jargons for the academic field while ELL and other terms would be better left aside.

Even though we consider that the choice of ELL as a keyword was relevant to reflect about its implications, future studies could redirect the data generation by replacing it for EB. In time, we acknowledge the demand to explore different social backgrounds and recommend occasionally excluding research from the US to fill this gap. Our results are predominantly from Spanish speakers learning English in this country, which is a fair reality but not the only possible environment EB could be living and attending school.

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O PROCESSO DE ATRIBUIÇÃO DE SENTIDO DAS CRIANÇAS PARA O APRENDIZADO DE INGLÊS: UMA REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo reunir resultados sobre a atribuição de sentido das crianças que aprendem inglês, enfocando práticas pedagógica nesta direção. Três palavras-chave foram adotadas: “processo de atribuição de sentido”, “crianças bilíngues” e “alunos de língua inglesa (ELL)”. Dez referências foram incluídas, nove dos Estados Unidos (EUA). Os estudantes deveriam ter experiência anterior com outra língua e o espanhol foi a mais citada. Os resultados apontam a translanguagem como tendência. Bilíngues emergentes, línguas minoritárias e majoritárias são citados como termos adequados, enquanto ELL e outros não. Para capturar diferentes condições de aprendizagem, estudos futuros podem excluir resultados dos EUA.

Palavras-chave: educação da criança, aprendizagem de línguas, teoria sócio-histórico-cultural.

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