EXPANDING SFL RESOURCES AND MAKING CONNECTIONS: REVISITING AND REIMAGINING MOHAN'S SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY

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As Michael Halliday has argued, language is the primary medium through which education is carried out and assessed in all content areas (Halliday, 1999, 2007; Wells, 1999). This is one of the key reasons why educational researchers, in particular those looking to improve education for students who struggle with language, have adopted SFL. SFL has migrated from its origins in Australia to North America with an aim to help teachers understand how language works to construct meanings in register- and genre-specific ways so that they can help their students succeed. SFL work in North America has been carried out in various curricular areas such as science (e.g., de Oliveira, 2017; Schleppegrell, 2002), history (e.g., Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008), and mathematics (e.g., Accurso, Gebhard, & Purington, 2017; Barwell, 2005). It has also been introduced in more general ways for elementary school teachers (e.g., Brisk, 2015) and older school students (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2004; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002).

Working from the SFL foundation, Mohan (1986) proposed that teachers and learners regularly engage in various social practices associated with their subject areas.

Mohan’s work, frequently referred to as the Knowledge Framework (KF), is an SFL-based linguistic model of a social practice. The KF involves six knowledge structures (KSs), which are semantic patterns of the discourse, knowledge, actions, artifacts, and environment of the social practice. Mohan (1986) proposed that three theory/action pairs of KSs that make up the KF—classification/description, principles/sequence, and evaluation/choice—relate language, thinking skills, content, and key visuals. Each of these KSs connects to relevant questions that can be asked about the content for teaching purposes, as Margaret Early (1990; 1991) detailed; this concept is an important step in the KF’s use in lesson and curriculum planning.

Mohan’s KF was met with enthusiasm in the 1980s (see Slater & Gleason, 2011, for a general description and review) and has continued to interest a number of educators and researchers working in North America within various content areas such as science (e.g., Huang & Morgan, 2003; Mohan & Slater, 2005; 2006; Slater & Mohan, 2010), physical education (e.g., Slater & Butler, 2015), mathematics (e.g., Huang & Normandia, 2007; 2008), foreign language instruction (e.g., Mohan & Huang, 2002), and writing instruction (e.g., Ma & Slater, 2015; 2016). The KF has also been examined in the context of task-based language teaching, or TBLT (e.g., Mohan, Slater, Beckett, and Tong, 2015) and in the assessment of project-based language teaching (e.g., Slater, Beckett, and Aufderhaar, 2006). Although much of this
literature concerns the use of the KF in pre-K to 12 classrooms, there is new and ongoing work on its use in higher education, with an edited volume planned for publication in 2019. An edited publication on PBLL is also in the works for 2019, with three chapters discussing the use of the KF within this Deweyan experiential approach to education. The KF is shown to be a good match with PBLL because both focus on the development of language, skills, and content in an integrated, meaningful, and student-centered manner (see Beckett & Slater, 2018).

In a nutshell, the KF is an SFL-based tool, a heuristic that can help teachers identify tasks that make explicit the integration of language, thinking skills, content, key visuals, and even technology in the planning and linguistic analysis of lessons, projects, and whole curricular units. As such, it expands resources and makes strong and useful connections between SFL and lesson planning, allowing teachers to reimagine ways to help their students become more aware of how language constructs meaning across registers.

References cited:


