Second language (L2) development as concept-mediated textual activity: Exploring the role of linguistic concepts in classroom L2 communication and learning

1. Statement of the problem
   The role that declarative language knowledge plays in second language (L2) learning is a current question of L2 research. Inspired by sociocultural theory (SCT), recent studies have addressed that question starting from the position that scientific grammatical knowledge or concepts should be the focus of L2 instruction. Their findings have demonstrated that such concepts can help learners understand and use L2 grammar accurately (Lantolf, 2011). Similarly, studies inspired by systemic functional linguistics (SFL) have explored the same question based on the position that texts (i.e., units of communication larger than the sentence), should be the focus of L2 instruction. Their findings have shown that developing a classroom language to talk about texts (i.e., metalanguage) promotes learners’ literacy in both first and second languages (Rose & Martin, 2012). Those findings notwithstanding, some relevant issues appear underrepresented in the previous two lines of research. For instance, the former has paid scant attention to the role of concepts other than grammatical ones or how those concepts are used by learners in pair-work talk, whereas the latter has not sufficiently explained how learners acquire metalanguage or how it promotes oral communicative abilities, especially in the L2.

   These gaps can be overcome if the two previous orientations to L2 pedagogy and research are combined. To that end, this study will explore the role of linguistic L2 concepts (i.e., concepts of how language works at the cultural, situational, discourse, and lexico-grammatical dimensions) in students’ development of their ability to use the L2 orally in two communication situations (shopping/selling in a farmers market and explaining a recipe). The study addresses four questions:

1. What role(s), if any, do linguistic L2 concepts provided by instruction play in learners’ oral L2 performance of a shopping exchange and a recipe explanation?
2. What are the linguistic characteristics of learners’ L2 performance of a shopping exchange and a recipe explanation during instruction?
3. What changes in the quality of learners’ L2 concepts about shopping exchanges and recipe explanations occur from the beginning to the end of instruction?
4. What role(s), if any, do the linguistic L2 concepts provided by instruction play in learners’ oral L2 performance in an unfamiliar communicative situation after instruction?

2. Theoretical/conceptual framework
   The first orientation to L2 pedagogy and research mentioned above is known as concept-based instruction, the second is known as genre-based pedagogy.

   Concept-based instruction and research (CBI). According to CBI, instruction can transform learners’ ability to think and act in any school subject if learners are taught scientific concepts that they can use as tools to control the content and procedures of their school tasks (Gal’Perin, 1992; Karpov & Haywood, 1998). Drawing on these ideas, various researchers have recently investigated the role of scientific grammatical concepts in L2 learning (Ferreira, 2005;
Negueruela, 2003; Serrano-Lopez, 2003; Swain et al, 2009; van Compernolle, 2011; Yanez-Prieto, 2008). Although their findings demonstrate that instruction based on such concepts results in learners’ accurate production of specific grammatical features such as tense, aspect, or prepositions (Lantolf, 2011), these studies have used little qualitative data of how learners may use concepts in pair-work talk, for example as they plan, perform, or assess their L2 performances during communicative tasks. Rather, most of those studies have asked learners to define the concepts or to explain why they used specific aspects of grammar during their L2 performance. Then, the studies have related that data to learners’ results in pre- and post-instruction grammar tests. In doing so, the studies have separated learners’ explicit knowledge of the concept (i.e., declarative knowledge) from its use during actual L2 communication.

Whereas this study shares the idea that scientific concepts can increase learners’ awareness and control of what they do, it differs from concept-based research in two significant ways. First, the study focuses not only on grammatical concepts, but also on concepts of second L2 use as a cultural and situated practice (i.e., genre and register), of how the L2 functions to create texts (i.e., discourse), and of how L2 vocabulary and grammar are used to create meaning in sentences (lexicogrammar). Second, the study conceives linguistic L2 concepts and L2 communication as a unit that cannot be separated (cf. Blunden, 2010; Mahn, 2012) and hence needs to be studied as learners’ do the different learning and communication tasks that instruction proposes. Following Greeno (2012), this study sees concepts as generalized and agreed upon explanations of how the L2 works at the cultural, situational, discourse, and grammatical dimensions of communication. This knowledge is not the formal knowledge of language used in linguistic theory. Rather, it consists of a learner-friendly version of knowledge about language, derived from SFL, which learners can use to support their attempts to communicate in the L2.

Genre-based (GB) pedagogy and research. Unlike concept-based instruction, genre-based pedagogy and research is based on SFL’s views that language is a social resource to create meaning and that language is closely related to the cultural and situational context in which it is produced (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). Such relation is theorized in SFL as a continuum of interrelated dimensions (i.e., cultural, situational, discourse, lexicogrammar, and phonology/graphology). These dimensions are realized simultaneously whenever we use language and result in the creation of texts. Consequently, GB pedagogy advocates that declarative knowledge of how all language dimensions create texts should be the focus of language instruction (Burns, 2010) and that, to that end, teachers and learners should develop a shared metalanguage to talk about texts.

Findings from GB research have shown that knowledge of those dimensions, expressed in metalanguage, can indeed help learners produce better texts (Byrnes, 2009; Coffin, 2006; Colombi, 2006; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004) as well as improve their ability to use specific linguistic resources such as nominalization (i.e., the turning of a verb into a noun), sentence types, modal verbs, or conjunctions (Banks, 2000; Byrnes, 2009; Colombi, 2006; Cullip, 2009). However, GB research has little explained how learners can acquire declarative language knowledge or the role of such knowledge in learners’ use of the L2 in situations not addressed by instruction (Callaghan, M., Knapp, P., & Noble, G., 1993).

3. Method, design, and procedures
This study used a cross-case study design (Duff, 2008) to investigate the role of linguistic L2 concepts in learners’ oral L2 communication and learning. With this goal in mind, I spent from February to early June of 2013 teaching L2-English in a public school in Colombia. I initially became familiar with the school and classroom context during February, then taught two learning units from March to May about shopping and selling in farmers markets and explaining a recipe, and finally oriented an extension task in which learners were exposed to a new oral genre in the L2. The focus on shopping and selling and on recipes was defined based on the school curricula. IRB approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Following SCT’s idea that the learning of concepts originates in social interaction, I collected data from classroom talk, both from whole-class discussions and pair-work, to see whether learners used linguistic L2 concepts to orient or explain their oral L2 production. Specifically, data was obtained through video and audio recording of L2 planning tasks (i.e., tasks in which learners planned upcoming L2 performance to shop/sell or to explain a recipe), oral performance tasks (i.e., tasks in which learners actually used the L2 in a shopping exchange or recipe), and assessment tasks (i.e., tasks in which learners assessed their L2 use after they had performed). Approximately 90 hours of pair-work talk were audio-recorded. I also kept a reflection log and students’ regular teacher took non-participant observation field notes; both log and field notes described classroom atmosphere, students’ reactions to materials, and perceived use of L2 concepts by students. Students also took an opinion survey about learning activities and materials.

Research setting and participants. The study took place in a sixth-grade classroom from Buenavista school. This school functions in an old school building, close to the main plaza in a small town from the Colombian Caribbean. The school serves about 180 low SES students, most of whose parents work informally as mechanics, moto-taxi drivers, or maids. Students were all female, in sixth grade, from 11 to 13 years of age (N=18). Lessons took place in a palm-roof kiosko, enclosed by chicken fence wire as walls, that serves as sixth-graders’ classroom. I chose sixth grade as the site for research because it is the first level of secondary school and thus marks a turning point in L2 education in Colombia. Unlike primary schoolers, sixth graders are taught L2-English by a certified teacher and during three hours per week. Given the case-study design of this research, only six participants were chosen, organized in three dyads.

4. Data analysis.

Data analysis and interpretation is based on concept-mediated linguistic choice as the unit of analysis. According to this unit, when learners attempt to communicate in the L2 they may resort to linguistic concepts as support for choosing the specific vocabulary and grammar they will use and for putting these together in texts. Analysis thus seeks to understand this unit using both theoretically-driven and emerging categories, as follows.

- Students oral production in the L2 will be analyzed using SFL’s coding categories for each one of the dimensions of language mentioned above (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). These categories will serve to describe the vocabulary, grammatical, and discourse features of learners’ L2 use and the relation of those features to specific communication situations.
• Researcher notes in the diary and reflection log and the regular teacher field notes will be analyzed through constant comparison (Strauss, 1987). Multiple-choice survey responses will be analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. Open survey questions will be analyzed through constant comparison.

• Coding of whole-class discussions and dyads’ talk during planning and analysis tasks will focus on learners’ metalinguistic talk (i.e., talk whose content is language itself), to identify whether learners’ use linguistic L2 concepts or other means as support for their L2 activity. I will code for the ‘type’ of linguistic L2 concepts (i.e., everyday, academic), the ‘scope’ of the concepts (i.e., the dimension of language they refer to), the ‘form of realization’ of the concept (i.e., materialized, verbal), and for other forms of support (e.g., teacher feedback).

• Once the previous three analyses are carried out, I will examine how students’ use of L2 concepts may be related to their oral L2 production during performance. Coding categories will be derived from the data through constant comparison. This analysis will provide the basis for comparing concept-mediated L2 use before, during, and after instruction, within and across learner dyads.

5. **Contribution to education or to knowledge of disciplines that inform School of Education programs.**

   This study will provide insights for understanding the role of linguistic L2 concepts in facilitating students’ oral L2 communication in classrooms. In so doing, it will undoubtedly enrich current discussions in Colombia regarding L2 learning in schools, especially at a time where the Colombian government has started a national language policy known as *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo-PNB* (National Bilingualism Program) (MEN, 2005, 2006). If linguistic L2 concepts are found to actually play a crucial role in students’ oral L2 communication and learning, an empirically-informed argument can be made for including such concepts in the Colombian L2 curriculum and for training L2 teachers for their promotion.

   The potential contributions of this study to theory building in the field of L2 education are also significant. Since the study merges SCT’s position that concepts are key for learners’ L2 development, with SFL’s view that authentic L2 communication requires knowledge of language as a situated cultural practice, it may help rethink L2 learning as ‘situated communicative practice’ that may be bolstered by explicit knowledge of how the L2 works. What is more, such findings may also inform ongoing discussions in other content areas concerning the role of concepts in promoting disciplinary understanding and skilled practice (Greeno, 2012).
References


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1. Research assistant

   *Transcriptions* $1200
   (30 hours of classroom pair-work interaction corresponding to one learner dyad. 30 hours of recording = 100 hours of transcription time @ $12.00/hour)

   *Reliability coder for pair-work interaction data* $300
   (25 hours @ $12.00/hour, includes training for coding)

   **TOTAL REQUESTED** $1,500

Justification

*Research assistant:* Transcription is necessary so that researcher can adequately analyze the data. Transcriptions for two learner dyads have already been completed by researcher, and have lasted 100 hours on average for 30 hours of pair-work interaction. Unlike interview data, pair-work interaction in this study occurs in both English and in Spanish and is highly conversational, thus making it more difficult to transcribe. Reliability coding is necessary to ensure the consistency of the coding scheme. I have already asked a colleague to serve as coder given her experience in teaching school learners and her proficiency in both English and Spanish.