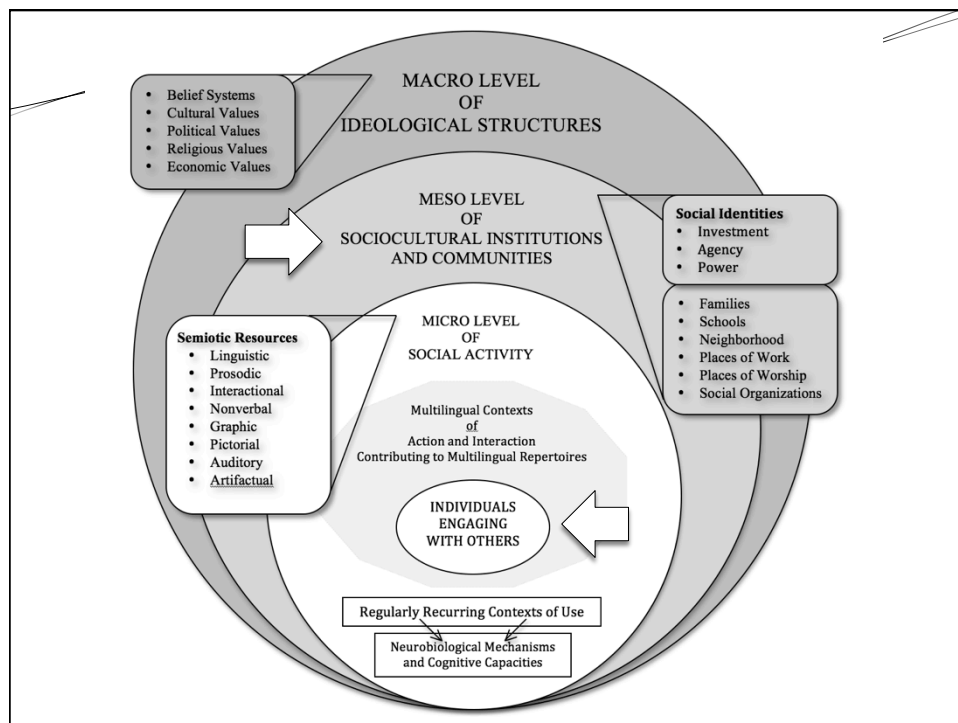


Celebrating 100 Years of *The Modern Language Journal*

Conceptualizing Language Learners: Socio-Institutional Mechanisms and their Consequences

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Modern Language Association Convention
Austin, TX
January 9, 2016



Theoretical framing: The “curricularization” of language

- When language is taught in classroom settings, it is “curricularized” (Valdés, 2015; Kibler & Valdés, in press)
 - Inherent in the design and implementation of language teaching programs

Theoretical framing: The “curricularization” of language

- Is part of a complex interacting system that includes:
 - conceptualizations of language and theories of L2 acquisition/development,
 - language policies (e.g., graduation unit/credit requirements),
 - traditions of instruction & ideologies of language,
 - teaching materials,
 - instructor competencies, and
 - required assessments.
- Involves inevitable (but contested) choices

Conceptualizations of learners

An important side effect of curricularization is learner categorizations, which:

- Reflect different view and definitions of language learning, language acquisition/development, and ultimate attainment
- Are inextricable from the belief that teaching influences and facilitates the process of language acquisition and development

Key questions

- How has formal language instruction both created and required learner categorizations, or “labels” over time?
- How do these labels reflect changing theoretical perspectives, educational policies, instructional materials, pedagogical traditions, and accountability requirements?
- Why and how do labels and categorizations matter?

Historical review of the *MLJ*

- 4 randomly selected original research articles or reports per year (1916-2014)
- Necessarily selective rather than comprehensive
- Cross-referenced previous historical overview (Horwitz, 2000)

Overall trends in socio-institutional learner labeling in *MLJ*

1. Early reliance on course-work/level alone gave way to more multi-dimensional descriptions
2. Contradictions in setting appropriate “levels” for coursework-based learner labels
3. Development of long-standing concerns in assessment
4. Lag in development of materials to meet new theoretical understandings of learners

1. Evolving student descriptions

Student descriptors by coursework or level alone:

“first and second
year French”
students
- Van Horne,
1919

“beginning”
students
- Beberfall, 1959

Books for
“intermediate”
students
- Azevedo, 1978

1. Evolving student descriptions

From 1990s onward, other learner characteristics were considered, though not in all cases:

- Age
- Home language background and proficiency
- Educational background
- Immigration background
- Previous instruction and out-of-class experiences in a language
- Assessed proficiency relative to ACTFL or other guidelines
- Self-rating of proficiency

2. Contradictions in setting appropriate “levels” for coursework-based learner labels:

Assumed Consensus	“Scattered” Reality
<p>“The regular first-year FL course ...should be modified to incorporate many of the characteristics and aims of both the exploratory and the general language courses even at the risk of sacrificing <i>some of the traditional first-year objectives.</i>” - Sofietti, 1958</p>	<p>“I have visited communities in various states and...find little agreement as to WHAT we shall teach our students to comprehend, speak, read, write, and interpret, except as determined by texts used, syllabi—often bewilderingly incomplete or out of date—of local or state departments, or the course content and methods of those institutions in which teachers have received their preparation.” - Bagg, 1956</p>

3. Development of long-standing concerns in assessment

- Prognostic/aptitude assessments (for learner admission & placement) challenged from the 1930s but their use referenced through the 1990s
- Language proficiency assessments became more psychometrically sophisticated, measured more aspects of language, and increased greatly in number

4. Lag in development of materials to meet new understandings of learners:

“Fundamentally the question to be discussed would be whether vocabularies are made for students or students for vocabularies?” – Engel, 1931

Research/theory developments “have not led to more than token presentation in American textbooks”
- Walz, 1986

A Contemporary Example: The Manufacture of “Long-term English Learner” Category

Federal and State Policies on Education and English Acquisition/Development
Assessment Results
Perceived Limitations of Language Instruction
Reading of Existing Scholarship on the L2 Acquisition of ELLs
Work of Educators and Researchers

What makes this category problematic

- Gives limited attention to “multi-competence” (Cooke, 1992, 1996, 2002) and creates perpetual L2 “learners”
- Places the focus on “English” to the exclusion of other factors
- Restricts curricular options for students

Final thoughts

- Why do learner conceptualizations matter?
- What do they tell us about our field today?
- What do they tell us about the future of our field?