

# Learning contexts, stages, processes, paths and trajectories

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Porquier (1994), Perdue (1996) and Py (1996) are pioneer studies that complete each other by addressing different dimensions of second language (L2) learning. Porquier's (1994) paper is a reflection on *learning contexts* and more specifically on the various communicative situations in which learning may take place (monolingual vs bilingual communication, endolingual vs exolingual communication). Perdue (1996) presents the European Science Foundation (ESF) research program that focused on informal language learning and resulted in the description of *learning / developmental stages*, common to speakers of all the second languages that were studied, the most prominent of which being the 'basic variety'. Finally, Py (1996) addresses *learning processes* by discussing the cognitive operations that L2 learners put to use when involved in second language conversations. In addition to these three fundamental notions – *learning contexts*, *stages* and *processes*, two key words caught my attention when reading these papers: first, "parcours", meaning *path* or *journey* ("parcours [individuels d'appropriation à long terme]", *individual long-term learning paths*, Porquier 1994: 168) and second, "itinéraire", meaning *route* or *trajectory* ("itinéraire linguistique d'individu", *individual linguistic route*, Perdue 1996: 65). While the meaning of these two words may overlap in some contexts, they are used by the authors to refer to distinct aspects of learning: "parcours" is used to refer to the individual's involvement into various learning situations (e.g. learning a language at school and at a later stage outside of school), while "itinéraire" is used to refer to the individual's development of competence over time (e.g. the regular use of uninflected verb forms and at a later stage the production of inflected forms). In the remainder of this commentary, I will use these two words to discuss some current issues that echo those addressed by Porquier (1994), Perdue (1996) and Py (1996). "Parcours" will be translated by *path* and "itinéraire" by *trajectory*. I will propose that contemporary research on second language learning can account for the eminently social nature not only of *learning contexts* but also of *learning processes*, before concluding with a short

reflection on the individual *versus* collective nature of L2 learning paths and trajectories.

### **On learning paths and the dynamic construction of interactional (learning) contexts**

Porquier (1994) proposes a continuum to represent language learning contexts, with 'purely' instructed learning at one end, and 'purely' non-instructed learning at the other. According to Porquier, these 'extreme contexts' are to be privileged when investigating L2 learning, although they only represent a small part of the often complex configurations in which second languages are learnt ("ces contextes extrêmes – qui constitueraient à ce titre des objets privilégiés d'investigation – ne recouvrent qu'une portion réduite du continuum", p. 168): learning paths may simultaneously or alternatively include both instructed and non-instructed learning.

Over the past twenty years, a large amount of studies have aimed at investigating learning paths and learning contexts, and have shown that the two 'extreme contexts' that Porquier (1994) describes as privileged contexts to investigate are idealizations rather than realities. The first context that Porquier (1994) describes, i.e. learning a language in a purely instructed setting without any possible contact with the target language outside of that setting, is disappearing in all the countries where the use of Internet is widespread. Recent studies have documented how Internet facilitates oral or written communication with other L2 speakers, whether in social interactions aimed at 'practicing' the second language and therefore explicitly oriented towards L2 learning (see e.g. Jespson 2005 on text- and voice-chat-rooms), or in second language conversations not primarily focused on language learning (see e.g. Thorne et al. 2009 on fan communities, virtual environments and online gaming spaces). The second context described by Porquier (1994), learning a language in a purely uninstructed setting, may also be receding nowadays in many countries due to the large range of learning material and courses offered on-line, but also because of a diversification of language courses offered to immigrants.

More generally, the distinction between instructional and non-instructional settings is in itself problematic. Conversation analytic studies on institutional interaction claim that the context of a social interaction is dynamically configured and possibly locally transformed by the participants. In this view, context is not a 'container' in which the social interaction takes place, but rather a sort of 'road' that would materialize under the feet of the participants as they walk on it (see the opposition between the 'bucket theory' of context and the 'yellow brick road' in Heritage & Clayman 2010, chapter 3). These studies have evidenced how each contribution to an on-going social interaction is both context-shaped and context-renewing: a context can therefore be

described as *institutional* only if the participants visibly orient to it as such, in other words, if the institutional character of talk is *emically* relevant (Schegloff 1992).

This conceptualization of context as dynamic and locally transformed in social interaction calls for more studies that document learning contexts beyond the boundaries of instructed *versus* non-instructed learning and that examine how the participants locally orient to what they do a) as institutional or not and b) as doing learning or as doing something else. A recent project on *au pair* girls learning French as a second language in Switzerland has for example documented that dinner table conversations involving the *au pair* and members of their host family represent social interactions in which the boundaries between institutional and non-institutional talk are blurred (Farina et al. 2012): the participants orient to these dinner-table conversations as 'ordinary conversations', but they sometimes subtly display professional identities – the *au pair* enacting the identity of a professional caregiver – and they sometimes use the conversation as an opportunity for instructed L2 learning, during which the participants momentarily establish a *didactic contract* ("contrat didactique", de Pietro et al. 1989). In sum, a conversational context may be momentarily reconfigured by the co-participants as an instructed learning context (or the reverse).

We agree with Porquier (1994: 168) that the investigation of learning paths is easier to broach through an inventory of learning contexts and situations rather than through an empirical account of learning ("se prête mieux à un inventaire typologique qu'à l'investigation empirique"). However, studies on L2 learners staying abroad after learning a language in an instructed setting provide interesting empirical insights into the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence (see e.g. Regan et al. 2009). While collecting longitudinal data 'following' learners in diverse learning contexts is a challenge, it would certainly provide a still better understanding of how learning paths combine with learning trajectories.

### **On the observation of learning trajectories in social interaction**

The European Science Foundation (ESF) research program presented in Perdue (1996) aimed at tracing the development of interlanguage over time. Recordings of social interactions involving L2 learners are used as data, but the research program was not aimed at documenting if and how L2 learning is shaped by the learners' participation in social interactions. The learning *trajectories* are documented by looking at utterance structures, with a focus on learning *products*. Py's (1996) paper adopts a very different but complementary perspective, focusing on the role played by social interaction in L2 learning and on learning *processes*. The paper provides an inventory of the socio-cognitive operations that L2 learners use when participating in second

language conversations: understanding 'fragments of meaning' ("bribes de sens", p. 15), generalizing lexical and grammatical knowledge, making word searches recognizable in order to get help, identifying and solving misunderstandings, etc. However, the paper does not investigate the development of L2 competence over time.

Throughout the last decade, socio-interactionist L2 studies have attempted to articulate these two research interests, i.e. a) documenting learning over time, in terms of developmental trajectories and b) documenting learning within social interaction in terms of interactional mechanisms ('doing learning'). Rather than locating cognition "inside the skull", these studies locate cognition as unfolding "in public view" (Kasper 2009). This perspective contrasts with that of Perdue (1996), because it supposes that the development of L2 competence over time cannot be properly documented by extracting and abstracting the learners' productions from the interactive context in which they occur. This perspective also contrasts with that of Py (1996) because it remains 'agnostic' regarding people's intra-psychological experience.

Conversation analytic (CA) studies on the development of L2 competence over time adopt different levels of granularity (Hall et al. 2011; Pekarek Doehler & Fasel Lauzon in press). 'Microgenetic' CA studies are concerned with change across very short time-spans which are apprehended in their full duration, and aim at grasping learning processes 'in flight' rather than sedimented learning outcomes<sup>1</sup>. They usually focus on patterns of language use such as the pronunciation of a word or a feature of grammar or lexicon (see e.g. Markee 2008; Seedhouse & Walsh 2010). The re-use by a second language learner of a previously elaborated lexical, grammatical or phonological feature within a new sequential context is seen as the result of a learning process that hinges on the turn-by-turn deployment of the co-participants' mutual actions. The turn-by-turn unfolding of social interaction is the analytic resource by means of which cognitive features such as attention focus, noticing and learning become observable to the researcher as enacted through the participants' conducts (Fasel Lauzon & Pekarek Doehler 2013).

By contrast, longitudinal CA studies on L2 learning are concerned with individuals or groups of learners who are recorded periodically over days, weeks, months or years, and aim at documenting learning trajectories over a long-time span (see e.g. Cekaite 2007; Hellermann 2007, 2008, 2011; see Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger forthcoming for an overview). Unlike microgenetic studies, longitudinal studies may not be appropriate to document learning processes as they emerge out of social interaction ('in flight'), but they allow grasping learning outcomes in terms of progressive change in the middle

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<sup>1</sup> As Py (1996, p.20) rightly notes, a forgotten learning product does not undermine the reality of the learning process: "on peut oublier ce que l'on a appris sans remettre en cause la réalité de l'apprentissage".

or long run. The strength of longitudinal CA studies lies in their ability to trace the development not only of linguistic but of pragmatic and interactional competence over time, by documenting change in the way learners accomplish actions and get involved in interactional practices (e.g. opening a task, initiating a story-telling episode, getting a co-participant's attention, managing disagreement episodes, etc.). 'Virtual' L2 learning trajectories can also be traced using cross-sectional designs which compare sets of data involving L2 learners at different levels (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger 2011). All these studies show learning as an eminently located process, configured through the learners' participation to social practices. They broach second language learning in terms of the progressive diversification of second language learners' procedures to accomplish social actions. An increased sensitivity for recipient design and the preference organization of talk, in other words, a better 'tailoring' of the contributions to the local context in which the talk takes place, are seen as indicating a development in the L2 learners' interactional competence.

### **Conclusion: can we still talk about *individual* learning trajectories?**

Porquier (1994) and Perdue (1996) explicitly present their research focus as the learning paths / trajectories of *individuals* ("parcours individuels d'appropriation à long terme", Porquier 1994, p. 168; "processus individuels d'acquisition", Perdue 1996, p. 63, "itinéraires individuels d'acquisition", *ibid.*, p. 65). However, learning paths are paved with participation to various instructional and non-instructional social interactions involving various co-participants, and learning processes are themselves embedded within these social interactions. In this regard, trying to 'extract' individual learning outcomes from the social interactions in which learning emerges is limited. As studies on language problem solving sequences show, orientations to learning are locally occasioned and collaboratively negotiated ("séquences de résolution de pannes de l'interaction", Py 1996, p. 22; see e.g. the now classic studies on "séquences potentiellement acquisitionnelles", de Pietro *et al.* 1989, and on "séquences analytiques", Krafft & Dausendschön-Gay 1993; for a recent study, see e.g. Fasel Lauzon & Pekarek Doehler 2013). Moreover, while Py (1996) and Porquier (1994) refer to learners interacting with native speakers (NS-NNS), work on learner-learner social interactions (NNS-NNS) has clearly shown that second language learners may benefit from social interactions with other learners, and may thereby collectively improve their level of competence (see. e.g. Swain 2000, Swain *et al.* 2002 on "collaborative dialogue", Pekarek Doehler 2006). Rather than attempting to infer and schematize individual trajectories from interactional data, a step further seems to broach learning as a contextualized, local and collaboratively achieved process, which can be observed through comparing situated instances of social interaction over time.

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