The Mediational Role of Classroom Practices During the Silent Period: A New-Immigrant Student Learning the English Language in a Mainstream Classroom

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For this article we aimed to understand the emergence of English as a second language for a newly immigrated Mexican student, a native speaker of Spanish, enrolled in a mainstream kindergarten classroom, who was undergoing the silent period (Krashen, 1981). Applying ecological approaches that emphasize learners in relationship with their environment, we analyzed three particular classroom practices and their respective mediational roles for the development of a second language (L2). Following Tomasello’s (1999, 2003) recognition that the understanding of communicative intentions is an essential prerequisite for language development, we argue that certain characteristics of routine classroom practices (i.e., shared objects, infrastructural elements, and speech patterns) provided key interactional and contextual affordances for the understanding and internalization of a shared system of symbols (linguistic and nonlinguistic) and, thus, for the emergence of the L2. This research suggests that our focal student was intentionally and actively engaged in L2 learning during this period of silence. In addition, our findings suggest that although the understanding of communicative intentions contributed to the legitimization of a student identity for the learner during the silent period, it did not contribute to the learning of academic content. We argue that ambiguity and multiplicity of intentions conveyed in some classroom actions may be particularly challenging for L2 learners in mainstream classrooms.

Despite research efforts to strengthen pedagogical methods and teacher preparation programs to address the needs of newly arrived immigrant English language learners (ELLs) included in English-dominant classrooms, these students continue to be underestimated in
their abilities to learn. Given that rapid demographic shifts in the United States indicate that the number of immigrant children enrolling in schools will continue to increase (Trueba, 1999), a clearer understanding of how new immigrant children (less than 2 years in the United States) reconcile the daunting tasks involved in being a student in a new language and cultural context is of national concern (see Snow, 2002).

Drawing on data collected during a larger, 1-year naturalistic inquiry into the L2 learning of four newly arrived immigrant Mexican students (less than 2 years in the United States and native speakers of Spanish) enrolled in a mainstream kindergarten classroom in a small school district in the Southeastern United States, we examined the mediational role of classroom practices as our focal students came to create and express meaning verbally and nonverbally in the new cultural/linguistic environment. For this article, we focus on one particular student who, for the duration of the study, was undergoing the silent period. As described in Krashen’s (1981) monitor theory, the silent period characterizes an early stage of L2 development during which some L2 learners, especially children, do not try to speak in the L2 (see also Krashen, 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

For the analysis of three episodes representative of regular classroom activities, we used ecological approaches emphasizing interactions between learners and their surrounding contexts (van Lier, 2002, 2004) and relied on Tomasello’s (2003) usage-base linguistic theories, which indicate that language development requires the understanding of communicative intentions.

THE SILENT PERIOD

Although the existence of a silent period has been reported by studies in second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis, 1994), research addressing this period of silence in early stages of language development has been scarce in the recent literature on education. However, mainstream teachers encountering a growing number of recently immigrated ELLs in their classrooms continue to be puzzled by their students’ silence and often question what students are learning during this time.

Indeed, researchers disagree about whether and how this particular stage contributes to L2 learning. For Krashen (1981), the silent period has didactic implications in SLA, supporting his idea that language learners must be provided with a large quantity of comprehensible linguistic input and must be given time to digest the input before being urged to produce linguistic output. Gibbons (1985) investigated two of Krashen’s major assumptions about the silent period, questioning whether it actually results from the need for input and acquisition before speaking and
whether the L2 curriculum should include an initial period of silence.
His study demonstrated that a period of silence, rather than beneficial to
SLA, may signal a lack of comprehension and, if prolonged, may mark
psychological withdrawal rather than acquisition. Similarly, Itoh and
Hatch (1978) argued that an extended silent period does not make any
contribution to SLA, especially because some children sink into it by
resisting or avoiding L2 learning.

In contrast, Clarke (1989), when examining the role of the silent
period in the acquisition of English as a second language of one Viet-
namese preschooler, argued that it may be a period of intense learning
and that the development of a social network during this time is impor-
tant in determining whether the child gains access to the new language.
Saville-Troike’s (1988) study involving nine young Chinese L2 learners
also highlighted a positive aspect of the silent period by linking it with
productive private speech. Using video recordings with powerful radio
microphones, Saville-Troike’s study revealed that during the silent pe-
riod, six out of the nine students in the study advanced their own learn-
ing by engaging in extensive private speech involving repetition of oth-
ers’ utterances, rehearsal for overt social performance, innovations of
linguistic forms, lexical substitutions, practice, and so on. In addition,
she contended that the experience of a silent period is closely related to
the learners’ social and cognitive orientation, which creates a fundamen-
tal distinction between two types of learners: other-directed and inner-
directed. The other-directed learners “approach language learning as an
interpersonal, social task with a predominant focus on the message they
wish to convey,” and the inner-directed learners view language learning
as an “intrapersonal task, with a predominant focus on the language
code” (p. 568). These inner-directed learners are reflective in nature and
typically go through the silent period by not initiating communicative
interactions with target language speakers. In addition, she found that
inner-directed learners produced private speech (i.e., speak silently to
themselves and are inaudible to anyone present) during the silent pe-
riod. By closely examining the nature of the use of private speech, Saville-
Troike asserted that, although there was no social linguistic production
during the silent period, the inner-directed, reflective learners were ac-
tually making extensive use of a variety of intrapersonal language learn-
ing strategies, such as repetition or rehearsal.

Although views about the silent period and its relevance to SLA vary,
most of the studies have approached the topic from an individual or
developmental perspective. For instance, although Saville-Troike’s study
provided insights on the productive learner activities during the silent
period, her conclusion attributed the nature of the activities to individ-
ual learners’ innate characteristics (i.e., other-directed versus inner-
directed). Not much consideration has been given to how learner actions during the silent period could be socially situated and culturally constructed within a particular context. By noting this limitation, we attempt to approach the phenomenon of the silent period from an ecological perspective that regard as main concerns for study a variety of relationships among learners, others, practices, and contexts.

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO L2 LEARNING: CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT OF ACTIVITY

Although the term ecology has referred mostly to a scientific discipline that considers the relationships of an organism with all other organisms, an expanded notion of ecology in social sciences research (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990) seeks to understand the dynamic relations of learners and the world, whether it is at a macrolevel (e.g., culture, history, or socioeconomic status) or at a microlevel (e.g., interactions, physical objects, or dialogues). More specifically, in relation to language learning, an ecological approach focuses on “language as relations between people and the world, and on language learning as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world” (van Lier, 2004, p. 4, emphasis added). In this way, studies of language learning from an ecological perspective include an investigation of dynamic and mutual influences between learners and surrounding contexts through semiotic resources such as the first language (L1) or L2 rather than investigations of the processing mechanism of linguistic input and output or predeterministic and normative notions of learning style.

Van Lier (2004) described an ecological approach to be neither a theory nor a method with which to do research but instead as a way of thinking (and acting), allowing for broad understandings of cultural, historical, social, institutional, and linguistic phenomena in the classroom. Although not a theory per se, the ecological approach draws from theoretical positions such as sociocultural theory.

At the core of the sociocultural theory is the concept of mediation, which emphasizes the dynamic interactions and negotiations between learners and material/symbolic artifacts (i.e., cultural tools) (Valsiner, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991, 1998; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Both the ecological approach and sociocultural theory recognize the significance of the context and its mediating role for human minds and actions and, furthermore, consider development as inseparable from the contexts of activities.

1 The term cultural here refers to the ways of acting, thinking, speaking, and behaving characteristic of a particular discursive context, in this case, schools.
Two central tenets of the ecological approach to language learning are the concepts of emergence and affordance. These are intimately related to the notion of mediation. That is, this approach proposes that language emerges as a mediated and situated activity from interactions between a learner and his or her surrounding context. From this perspective, then, the emergence of language cannot be understood without considering the physical, social, and symbolic context in which learners are engaged. The ecological approach considers the context of human activity through the idea of affordance, which refers to “what is available to the person to do something with” (van Lier, 2004, p. 91). Herein, language arises from, and is mediated through, various types of affordances or a myriad of opportunities for meaningful action and interaction offered to an engaged participant.

Thus, when L2 learning in the classroom setting is viewed from an ecological perspective, the classroom practices per se become a mediational process in shaping particular relationships between learner and context. A learner’s actions are understood in relation to the constraints and affordances of a particular instructional context and its inherent social practices. Using this approach, then, researchers can ask certain questions: “What is it in this environment that makes things happen the way they do?” and “how does learning come about within this particular context of activity?” (van Lier, 2004, p. 13).

For our research, we found the ecological approach particularly relevant as we aimed to understand how a kindergarten student undergoing the silent period began to create and express meaning in the new linguistic and cultural environment of school, while also attending to the tasks of becoming a legitimate member of the classroom, learning a new language, and gaining knowledge of the content of instruction (see also Kramsch, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the next section, we focus specifically on the microlevel phenomenon of language emergence as language learners’ perceptions and actions are mediated through various physical, symbolic, and interactional affordances.

**INTERACTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL AFFORDANCES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Recent advances in SLA research have underscored the role of interactional and contextual affordances for language learning. Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006), for example, have claimed that L2 learning can be better understood when it is conceived through the lens of emergentism, or the idea that “patterns in language development and of language use are neither innately prespecified in language learners/users nor are they triggered solely by exposure to input. Instead, language behavior is
said to emerge from the *interaction* between the agent and the agent’s environment” (p. 577, emphasis added). According to this view, the imperfect relationship between what the context demands and what language is available to the language learner/user, provides opportunities for successive (and sometimes chaotic) reorganizations of linguistic features. These reorganizations of linguistic features eventually give rise to certain regularities or patterns which are qualitatively different from earlier organizations.

In his discussions about the contributions of sociocultural theory and research to L2 learning, Lantolf (2006) has also emphasized the importance of interactional and contextual affordances in language learning processes. Highlighting two of Vygotsky’s central theoretical constructs, mediation and internalization, Lantolf stressed the notion that the social and cultural contexts should not be considered as mere factors influencing cognitive development, as these are, in fact, the source of specifically human forms of development (p. 69). For example, in educational settings certain physical and symbolic artifacts (e.g., linguistic and numeric systems, books, pen, papers, diagrams, charts, and so forth) mediate the relationships between individuals as well as between individuals and their material and mental worlds and have the goal to help students develop conceptual knowledge (p. 70). As individuals appropriate, or internalize,² these cultural artifacts into their own psychological functions, they are able to abstract from their physical worlds and to act independently from their immediate realm of perception through the organization and reorganization of symbols (e.g., understanding that $2 + 3 = 5$).

Lantolf (2006) pointed out that Vygotsky was particularly interested in the ways children gained control over and made use of different cultural artifacts as mediational means afforded by their environments when confronted with difficult tasks. Lantolf highlighted the role of imitation as an important mechanism for the internalization of socially constructed forms of mediation, including language. Tomasello’s (1999, 2003) model of language acquisition also assigns a central role to imitative processes, which we discuss in the following section.

**IMITATION, COMMUNICATIVE INTENTIONS, AND INTENTIONALITY**

Tomasello (1999, 2003) proposes that the development of communicative intention–reading skills is the basis for children to develop their

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² From a sociocultural perspective, the process of internalization is said not to happen exclusively inside the an individual’s head, but it is instead a negotiated process of development co-constructed both intra- and interpersonally through continuous interactions between an individual and his environment (Lantolf, 2006).
linguistic knowledge and to socialize into their community. Two major aspects relating to intention reading are the establishment of joint-attentional frames and role-reversal imitation. The joint-attentional frames established among interlocutors are regarded as one of the initial steps for communication to occur (Tomasello, 1999, 2003; van Lier, 2002). Through constantly monitoring each other’s attention during interaction, attentional frames are jointly established and coherently sustained to “create a common intersubjective ground within which children and adults may understand one another’s communicative attempts and their current relevance” (Tomasello, 2003, p. 25).

These joint-attentional frames are characterized as a triadic mediation that involves both people and objects engaged in the particular interaction. Within the joint-attentional frames, a child comes to understand communicative intentions by recognizing that an adult is making some sounds with the particular intention that the child attend to an object. This object is not always material but can be an event or idea being referred to linguistically or by nonlinguistic signs or symbols.

Once a learner understands the communicative intentions embedded in linguistic interactions, the learner attempts to express his or her own particular communicative intentions. More specifically, children initiate their utterances by engaging in role-reversal imitation, where they “must learn to use a symbol toward the adult in the same way the adult used it toward them” (Tomasello, 2003, p. 27). Through performing this role-reversal imitation, therefore, children learn the ways of using linguistic symbols understood intersubjectively from both sides of the interaction (e.g., the use of first- and second-person pronouns). In this way, language emergence is characterized by the development of complex linguistic abilities through transformation rather than through repetition or mimicking, and it happens not in a linear, gradual fashion, but rather, as a process of growth and reorganization of semiotic systems.

Although Tomasello’s (2003) linguistic theories are intended to explain children’s L1 development, we find his explications of how humans come to understand and to participate in communicative interactions to be particularly compelling for the investigation of beginning-level L2 learners as they come to understand and participate in communicative interactions in a new language and culture. His theory informed us to attend to various resources in the classroom and to features of taken-for-granted classroom practices in order to understand how they may play a critical role as affordances for SLA. For example, in examining the microlevels of the classroom, we paid particular attention to various types of affordances for language learning, such as the physical, social, and linguistic cues, signaling communicative intentions that attracted interlocutors’ perceptions and attention and purposefully engaged them in a particular activity.
In addition, for our research, we have also considered Olson’s (1994) cautionary claim that an understanding of communicative intentions may not necessarily imply an understanding of intentionality (p. 128). Olson explains that to understand one’s intentionality, the listener must have an understanding of what one means by what one says, and “that is a matter of understanding what one wants a listener to think, or thinks a listener thinks” (p. 130). In other words, to understand intentionality, one must have an increased understanding of intersubjectivity to be able to interpret what was meant by the speaker (or writer). For Olson, this is a sophisticated (or in his words, “second-order” [p. 130]) level of understanding. Moreover, he goes on to say that young children (up to the age of 8) may have difficulty in understanding intentionality from a point of view other than their own. That is, although they may be able to identify what they thought a listener would understand by what was said, they may not know that other interpretations may be possible. This point is exemplified by our study, to which we now turn.

THE STUDY

In congruence with the theoretical framework just delineated, for this research we describe and explain the mediational role of classroom practices in the emergence of the L2, particularly in the case of one student, Juan, who was undergoing the silent period. By observing actions involving physical or symbolic tools—including dialogue—we captured the actions, interactions, and discourse of participating members within the context of a kindergarten classroom.

The focus of our analysis, then, was the understanding of how the L2 was emerging by observing how one specific student integrated a system of signs and symbols into the tasks in which he was involved as he came to create and express meaning in the new linguistic, cultural, and institutional setting of school. Using this method of analysis as a frame of reference, we examined language development as it happened both over time and from moment to moment.

Methods

This study stems from a larger naturalistic inquiry into the language and literacy development of L2 students in mainstream classrooms. The classroom observed was selected on the basis of (a) the principal’s recommendation in relation to a highly interactive and inclusive classroom environment and (b) the teachers’ willingness to have research con-
ducted in their classroom. Kindergarten was of particular interest to us because it represents the entranceway to the institutional context of school. The focal students were selected on the basis of (a) their native language being other than English and (b) the fact that they had never attended the institutional context of school before entering kindergarten in the United States.

Qualitative research methods and a case study design were used. For the larger study, the focal participants were four recent-immigrant Mexican students included in a kindergarten mainstream classroom, two team-teachers, and to a lesser extent, the other 16 children in the class. The school was located in a small town in the Southeastern United States that had experienced a sudden increase in its Spanish-speaking population. The classroom was orderly, and the children seemed engaged in instructional activities for the majority of the time during our observations. The teachers were both white and English monolingual. Each had about 25 years of experience as a kindergarten teacher; however, neither had much experience in working with L2 learners. They had been team-teaching for the past 12 years and held similar philosophical assumptions about the teaching of kindergarten as well as about the teaching of L2 students. They both believed that the main goal of kindergarten was to socialize students in the culture of schools by helping the children learn how to follow procedures and how to act as a student. Regarding their orientation toward language use in the classroom, they both followed the English-only federal policy guidelines for instruction in all subject areas, aiming to promote the expedient acquisition of English for the ELLs in the class. Thus, no languages other than English were spoken in the classroom.

Two researchers and one research assistant conducted this investigation as participant-observers. For one academic year (September to May), we visited the classroom about two to three times a week at different times of the day to observe a variety of classroom activities. In addition, we observed our focal students in various contexts within the school, such as the cafeteria, the playground, the Spanish class, and the ESL class. The data consisted of field notes, anecdotal records of students’ interactions, academic artifacts (i.e., student products), about 20 hours of videotape, and audiotaped interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with the two classroom teachers, the principal, the ESL teacher, the Spanish teacher, and our focal students on an as-needed basis. Focal students’ interviews were carried out in both English and Spanish, moving from one language to the other when appropriate. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the study and lasted for several months after the period of data collection. The highlighted episodes were purposefully selected because they reflect routine practices of the classroom and were useful in helping us understand the processes of L2 learning.
The data presented in this article pertain to a case-study involving a 5-year-old student—Juan (a pseudonym)—who was undergoing the silent period. He had emigrated from Jalisco, Mexico, about 1 year prior to the beginning of this investigation. His father was a construction worker, and his mother worked in the fast food industry. He had no siblings. He was preliterate in both Spanish and English and spoke only Spanish at home.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For this study, we analyzed three episodes depicting regularly occurring (daily or weekly) classroom practices involving the particular case of Juan, one of our focal participants: the Quiet Mouse, learning centers, and testing practices. We organize our presentation of the data within three major types of affordances that contributed to intention reading and thus to the emergence of the L2. The types of affordances discussed in our analysis are a shared object, speech patterns, and the infrastructural elements of a particular classroom practice.

Affordance 1. A Shared Object—The Quiet Mouse

This practice was performed during transitions between class activities mainly in order to keep students quiet. Teachers did not play a major role in this practice except assigning a student to initiate the practice. A student holding a mouse puppet in her or his hand walked around among other students, who were sitting on the floor, to find the quietest child. Students were waiting silently, wishing to be picked. The one who was picked took over the mouse puppet and continued the activity by walking around and picking the next student. This quiet-mouse practice took place more than once per day. It worked to re-establish order in the classroom during transitional periods. One of the major characteristics of this Quiet Mouse practice was that one physical object (i.e., the mouse puppet) played a major mediational role in promoting students’ active participation in the practice. In addition, the object allowed students to take particular roles (e.g., an appointer and an appointee) in a legitimate fashion.

The presence of the mouse puppet contributed to establishing joint-attentional frames among students by drawing their attention to the

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5 By infrastructures we mean the organizational, structural, and procedural elements that teachers put into place to facilitate and make expedient the routines of the classroom.
particular object itself. Once a student with the mouse stood up in front of other students to make the gesture of selecting a quiet student, other objects in the classroom (e.g., alphabet charts, rugs, crayons, or books) that did not have immediate relevance to the practice were excluded from the students’ attention. Students engaged in the practice attended jointly to the mouse puppet while doing the Quiet Mouse.

In relation to Juan, we noted that two sets of joint-attentional frames were established during this practice. One frame involved Juan, the mouse puppet, and other students sitting on the floor. The other was formed by Juan, the mouse puppet, and a student holding the puppet (see Figure 1). In the first frame, Juan’s gaze, as well as other students’, followed the mouse puppet. In the second frame (which in fact took place simultaneously with the first frame), Juan’s gaze still followed the mouse while the student with the mouse was exploring randomly to find the quietest classmate. These two sets of joint-attentional frames can also be said to form two sets of referential triangles in which linguistic, especially indicational, processes might occur.

These frames featured a triadic interaction in the sense that interactions between Juan and other(s) were heavily structured by the object of their joint attention, which was the mouse puppet. In other words, the mouse puppet played a role as the “third interlocutor of sorts” in the three-way interaction (van Lier, 2002, p. 148), as well as a major mediator in drawing students’ attention to, and engagement in, the practice. The common ground established through this joint engagement formed the referential triangles within which communication, both intentional and linguistic, between Juan and other, native-speaking peers took place.

Within these joint-attentional frames, the shared mouse puppet played a role as a communicative sign that signified particular intentions of the individuals involved in the practice. For instance, if a student wore

FIGURE 1
Joint-Attentional Frames Established During the Quiet Mouse Practice (adapted from Tomasello, 2003, p. 26).
the mouse puppet, the puppet mediated communication between the student and others by signaling the student’s intention: “I will pick one of you. You should be quiet to be picked.” In addition, other students who did not have the puppet followed the mouse with quiet gazes. This situation might signal to Juan their shared intention involving the puppet: “I will not make a sound because I want to get the puppet.”

Juan seemed to understand various communicative intentions signaled by the presence or absence of the puppet. He was observed to perform appropriate actions for the practice. During the Quiet Mouse, Juan was not only quiet but also pointed to himself as if to say, “Hey, pick me! I am quiet.” This action served as evidence that Juan understood another person’s intention in the specific practice and that the understanding of intention influenced his intentional state in ways relevant to the situation. The object of the mouse puppet, in other words, mediated this communication through intention reading and actively engaged Juan in the practice.

In addition, the Quiet Mouse characterized flexible role-taking: Once a student holding the mouse puppet (i.e., appointer) picked a student from the ones sitting on the floor (i.e., potential appointees), the new student took the role of appointer. In other words, to imitate another’s role, including their intentional actions and utterances, was one of the necessary actions to participate in the Quiet Mouse.

Tomasello (2003) argued that this role-reversal imitation involved “reproducing triadically [others’] novel intentional actions on outside objects” (p. 26). This role-reversal imitation is distinctive from face-to-face dyadic mimicking observed in early infancy in the sense that participants understand that persons are making intentional utterances and actions (Tomasello, 2003). In Juan’s case, it was observed that when he was playing the appointer, he reproduced appropriate actions for the role, including holding the mouse puppet on his hand, walking around students, looking at each student cautiously, delaying to make a decision, and finally pointing to only one student. This series of actions demonstrated that Juan reproduced an appointer’s intentional actions but not accidental ones. In particular, the mouse puppet mediated this role-reversal imitation by granting Juan’s reversed role from appointee to appointer and by affirming his authority over other students.

The Quiet Mouse practice was found to provide an opportunity for Juan to learn particular actions and utterances related to this activity in a context in which intention reading could take place effectively. Although silence was the aim of this practice, kindergarteners often made utterances relating to the practice, such as, “Hey, be quiet!” “I’m quiet. Pick me,” “She picked XXX”, and “XXX was picked!” The students’ utterances developed from a few core ideas (e.g., picking, being picked, and
being quiet) by showing that the content of their utterances were mediated through these features of the Quiet Mouse practice.

During our year-long classroom observation, we noted that Juan’s reaction to this practice changed dramatically as he participated in it repeatedly. When we first observed Juan engaged in the Quiet Mouse, he did not speak a word in other class activities; however, he often raised his hand. During the first several weeks of the school year, raising his hand was the only action that Juan performed to communicate with others. This observation led us to assume that, even though Juan might have understood that this practice was about choosing and being chosen, he did not understand exactly what kind of action he was supposed to take to participate in this activity. Furthermore, the linguistic input provided during this practice was assumed to be unfamiliar to him because he had attended the English-dominant classroom for only a couple of weeks. It was not certain, therefore, to what extent Juan understood at that moment the Quiet Mouse practice and its related utterances, such as “Pick me!” or “You should be quiet.”

As we continued our observations of this particular practice, however, we found that Juan was obviously learning what the Quiet Mouse activity intended. For example, Juan consciously reacted by being quiet and keeping his eyes on the student with the puppet. He did not raise his hand but instead sat still and tried eye-contact with the one who had the puppet. That is, Juan came to understand the participants’ communicative intentions.

Also, there was telling evidence that Juan had been attending to and learning the language pertinent to the Quiet Mouse activity. One day, he tested what he had learned from the practice by doing role-reversal imitation. While he was sitting on the floor waiting to be picked, he said to a friend, “I’ll pick you.” His friend reacted, “No, I’ll pick you,” and Juan pointed at him again and repeated, “I’ll pick you.” Although Juan was still undergoing the silent period during most of the other class activities, he uttered these sentences naturally and correctly. Considering that these comments consisted of some of the few utterances that Juan could produce by the end of his kindergarten year (along with “that’s okay,” “thank you,” and “I’m done”), we concluded that particular characteristics of the Quiet Mouse promoted Juan’s intention-reading skills and subsequently facilitated Juan’s linguistic acquisition.

It should be noted that we do not mean to suggest that Juan was learning corresponding words by linking particular words with perceptual actions or situations. Rather, confirming some of the theoretical claims of Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006) and Lantolf (2006), Juan’s utterances seemed to emerge from the interaction between the learner and his environment and were a social act involving intention and role-reversal imitation, not mere mimicking of what was heard. Through
performing this role-reversal imitation, therefore, Juan was learning the ways of using linguistic symbols understood intersubjectively from both sides of the interaction. That is, from this perspective Juan was learning language by understanding that the persons were making sounds with the intention that he would attend to something (Tomasello, 2003). In this episode, Juan’s language learning was afforded by the object mediation that facilitated his understanding of the communicative intentions of people who shared attention. Meaning was, thus, socially situated and constructed through the engagement in this classroom practice.

Affordance 2. The Infrastructural Elements in Learning Center Practices

Each afternoon for about 60 minutes, all students in the kindergarten class participated in learning center activities. These activities were designed to provide students with independent practice that reinforced mathematical or literacy concepts that the teachers had already taught and the students had practiced under guidance. In our repeated observations, we noted that the procedural aspects of these activities were highly routinized and involved several steps.

There were six learning centers. Materials for the activities were placed on tables located in the different areas of the classroom. The different learning centers were identified by signs that hung from the ceiling showing a specific shape and color (e.g., the black oval center). The colors of the hanging signs matched six sets of colored clothespins placed in a container.

To work in one of the centers, each student was first given a recording sheet of paper with graphic symbols, indicating the sequential order in which the students were to visit the learning centers during the time allocated for the activity. Second, students were to match a code number marked on their sheet (e.g., MA9 or LB1) with the label of a box arranged on the shelves by subject (e.g., “L” for literacy, and “M” for mathematics) and by the order of increasing difficulty symbolized by alphabetical (A–G) and numerical (1–9) sequences. These boxes contained task cards, worksheets, and a cardboard picture of a stop sign, which opened into a tent-like structure that stood on the flat surface of the table. Third, the students fastened a colored clothespin to their shirt, and directed themselves to the learning center underneath the matching colored sign. For example, a child with a black clothespin fastened to her shirt worked at the center with the black oval sign hanging from the ceiling.

Four students sat at the learning center tables to perform their as-
signed tasks. Each child had his or her own box, coded with a level of difficulty appropriate to the child. Once sitting at the table (and almost in concert), the children took the task cards out of the box, placed the box underneath their chair, opened the stop-sign-shaped tent and waited for the teacher to come by the center to explain the task. Once the teacher had explained the tasks, the teacher left the students, who were to perform the assignments individually.

A worksheet and an illustration of the expected finished product accompanied each learning center. After completing the task, the students colored in the designated shape for the learning center (e.g., oval) on their recording sheets according to the color of the sign hanging from the ceiling and of their clothespin (e.g., black). The teacher would then come by the learning center again and sign her name on the recording sheet to verify completion of the task. Afterward, the students stood on a designated line (marked with masking tape on the floor) waiting for permission from the teacher before rotating to the next center. As they received permission, they returned their colored clothespin to the proper container and exchanged it for another, matching the color for the next center. This procedural cycle was repeated six times during the learning center hour.

The infrastructural aspects of center activities created many affordances for intention reading to take place, making it easier for Juan to gain control over and make use of the mediational means afforded by the classroom environment (Lantolf, 2006). For example, multiple joint-attentional frames were established between each individual child, the teacher, and the nonlinguistic signs and symbols that mediated this activity (e.g., the signs hanging from the ceiling, the colored clothespins, the coded boxes, the recording sheet, the stop signs that were placed on the table, the finished-product example, and the masking tape line on the floor). These served as symbolic mediators for the learning centers, enabling Juan to quickly become adept at following each of the steps, although the procedures for the activities were decidedly complicated (it took our research team several weeks to fully understand how it all worked).

Although we noted that very few words were exchanged during those 60 minutes, except for the teacher’s explanation of the tasks and for the occasional interactions among students sitting at the same learning center, in our observations it was evident that Juan paid very close attention to each of the symbolic cues, frequently checked the matching codes (on the box and on his worksheet), and intently monitored the actions of other students who were working in the center simultaneously.

For example, during one of our observations, the teacher had intended for Juan to work independently at a particular learning center; thus, she assigned appropriate tasks for each individual student. His task
involved creating a kind of hat out of construction paper by cutting the paper along the traced lines, attaching corners, and then counting and gluing three colored precut stars. The instructional purpose for this activity was to reinforce the conceptual understanding of the number 3. In performing this activity Juan rigorously followed all of the procedural aspects just described; however, instead of gluing three stars on the hat as shown in the premade illustration provided by the teachers, he glued only two. Once finished, another student, Pedro (a pseudonym), who was working silently by Juan’s side, noticed the discrepancy, pointed to the stars on his hat and to the ones on the premade illustration, and said to him (in English): “You need three stars.” Juan looked at the illustration and at his own product, noted the difference, and answered, “Okay, thank you,” and proceeded to glue another star on the hat. After he finished, he asked Pedro: “Is okay?” Through this interaction, a joint-attentional frame was formed between Juan, Pedro, and the finished product, which facilitated his understanding of what he needed to do to complete the task successfully. By establishing joint attention with Pedro, Juan was not only able to understand the teacher’s instructional intentions and to correct his error but also to break his silence, making utterances that were relevant to the social context of the activity.

We note that the teachers had multiple intentions for this activity (e.g., following directions and the development of a conceptual understanding of the number 3). The teachers’ intentions regarding the content of instruction were, however, more subtly conveyed and, thus, undermined by more obvious semiotic cues that pointed to proper classroom actions. In this case, Juan was clearly attuned to the teacher’s intentions related to the following of procedures. These intentions were seemingly the most prevalent and salient in that classroom context and indeed important for Juan to understand. In fact, when we asked one of the teachers, during an interview at the closing of our project, what she deemed to be the most essential skills with which her students should leave kindergarten, she promptly answered: “Following procedures. . . . they can learn everything else in first grade, but if they do not know how to act [as a student], chances are they won’t succeed.”

Affordance 3. Speech Patterns in Testing Practices

Each week in the kindergarten classroom, students took simple, teacher-made tests under the guidance of either of the homeroom teachers. These tests consisted of a one-page testing sheet and lasted for approximately 20 minutes. By and large, the tests were designed to assess the children’s achievement levels in relation to sound–letter relationships, word recognition, and spelling. Students were divided into two
groups according to their levels of literacy abilities: Students with emergent levels of literacy took simpler tests involving circling sound-letter relationships, whereas advanced students took a cloze test, placing one or two letter(s) in designated blank spaces to form a particular word. All testing materials included pictures illustrating the tested words. The tests happened every week on the same day and were performed in a regular and structured fashion: First, one of the teachers instructed the students about how to take tests; second, she requested that students sit in places isolated from others; third, she asked them to write their names in the testing sheet before filling in answers; fourth, she gave word prompts for each question of the test; and last, she collected the completed testing sheets.

These routine actions relating to testing established a triadic joint-attentional frame between the teacher and Juan through the mediation of the testing procedures, which became a basis for Juan to attend to the communicative intentions of the teacher at specific moments during the practice. For example, at the beginning of the school year, Juan could not understand the teacher’s direction: “Write your name in the first line.” Within the first few weeks, however, he learned that he should write his name on the first line of the testing sheet as soon as he received one. The communication between the teacher and Juan took place through the repeated and procedural testing practice within their shared attentional frame.

Another major characteristic of this testing practice was that the teacher giving the test tended to modify her patterns of talking and acting. The modifications of the speech patterns were not random but had some consistent features, such as slow, emphasized, and articulated speaking. Juan’s intention reading seemed to be facilitated through the teacher’s modified ways of speaking within the joint-attentional frame between the teacher, the testing sheet, and Juan. When a teacher gave prompts for each question, she pronounced each word slowly and with strong emphasis, which sounded quite different from her usual ways of speaking in the classroom. In addition, the prompts, which consisted of individually spoken words, not sentences, helped Juan read the teacher’s message that they were doing tests. For instance, Juan took a test intended to review the sound-letter relationships involving the letters *a* and *o*. In the test, the teacher pronounced simple words such as *dog* and *cat*, and Juan was supposed to fill in the space of “d _ g” and “c _ t” under each picture. The teacher sounded the words being tested articulately, strongly, and repeatedly, which was different from her usual ways of

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4 A cloze procedure is a fill-in-the-blanks activity used to assess reading comprehension where the learner uses clues from the textual context to supply words that have been deliberately removed from the reading passage.
speaking. It was evident that Juan sensed that these unusual speech patterns of the teacher had to do with the test. He went ahead with no hesitation to write either a or o in each blank space right after the teacher’s prompt. Juan wrote answers either by copying other students’ answers or by choosing letters randomly, carefully trying to match his answers with the teacher’s prompts in terms of timing.

In addition, the teacher repeated the comment “the next one is” between prompts to signal a transition. Juan understood that this phrase was not directly related to the words being tested but indicated the next turn. He did not move when the teacher uttered this sentence; however, he moved his hand instantly to the testing sheet and wrote something in the given blank space when he heard the carefully articulated and emphasized words. For instance, during a test about beginning consonants, when the teacher said, “the next one is,” Juan did not withdraw his attention from the teacher. However, when the teacher said, “cup, cup, cup,” Juan looked at the picture of a cup on his testing sheet, pretended (in a performative sense) to think for a while, and circled the wrong letter n in the options of b, c, n. This series of actions was observed consistently in most testing events.

Based on these observations, we found that the procedural elements of testing, the teacher’s modified speech patterns, and the transitional comments (e.g., “the next one is” or “are you done with number XX?”) contributed to establishing and maintaining the joint-attentional frame between Juan, the teacher, and the testing materials throughout the testing practice. Within this triadic joint-attentional frame, Juan paid attention to the teacher’s speech patterns related to the testing procedure and was able to understand what the teacher asked him to do, even though she spoke in English.

Nevertheless, we observed that Juan did not develop an understanding of sound–letter relationships throughout the year. His answers were consistently incorrect up until the end of the second semester, even though he continuously showed appropriate testing actions (his average score for the year on those tests was only about 20%). We deduced that Juan’s difficulties in acquiring sound–letter knowledge might have been caused by possible communicative conflicts between the teacher’s intentionality and Juan’s intention reading. Similar to the episode described in Affordance 2 related to the learning center practices, there might have been multiple levels of intentions involving both linguistic content and the procedural elements of the testing practices. Although the teacher used a variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic cues to help students engage in the activity in a performative way, another intention involved in testing practices surely was for students, including Juan, to answer the questions correctly. However, Juan seemed to interpret the
teacher’s intention as no more than “asking to take particular actions” that was appropriate for the testing practice.

Because the purpose of testing practices was to assess students’ literacy skills, the teachers refrained from giving any feedback to the students as related to the content of the questions during the test practices, even when they noticed a student’s repeated incorrect answers. However, they tended to give Juan positive feedback when he performed a set of testing actions successfully. For example, when Juan figured out which question was being asked and what he needed to do (e.g., circling a letter), the teacher responded to him positively by saying “yes, good job,” although she noticed that Juan was marking wrong answers. Here, in agreement with Olson (1994), Juan’s (a 5-year-old’s) difficulties in discerning between what was said and what was meant—a sophisticated order of understanding—might have been exacerbated by an immediate preoccupation with understanding the teacher’s communicative intentions rather than her intentionalities. As such, Juan interpreted the teacher’s positive feedback as the sign that he was answering the items correctly.

In addition, we conjectured that Juan might have failed to acquire content knowledge (i.e., the sound–letter relationship) because the prompts of tested words were given in decontextualized and abstract forms. Unlike the teacher’s oral directions for the testing procedures, which were mediated by the unique format of testing sheets, the isolated tested words did not provide Juan with recognizable affordances to attend to the actual forms and meanings of the words. Thus, the words being tested did not seem to attract Juan’s attention, and a joint-attentional frame was not established between the teacher, Juan, and the content of the test. Instead, the joint-attentional frame that had been more concretely established (between Juan, the teacher, and the testing sheet) facilitated Juan’s understanding of the teacher’s intentions and utterances involved in following procedures.

We emphasize that although Juan did not acquire the content knowledge intended for this activity, as he gained experiences in the testing practice he gradually became more adept and natural in the activity. By the end of the year, he was able to raise his hand and say “I’m done” to let the teachers know he was finished. Further, as his actions in testing appeared ever more spontaneous and confident, his presence in the classroom no longer stood out among other students who were native speakers of English. In addition, his acquisition of social skills (e.g., following the test formats) and of some linguistic knowledge, if limited (e.g., understanding the teacher’s oral directions and uttering a few task-related sentences), contributed to the emergence of social, cultural, and linguistic knowledge ultimately required to be a legitimate member of the classroom community.
CONCLUSION

Our data suggest that, during the silent period, our focal student was actively learning to create and express meaning in the L2 and that this learning was not necessarily occurring just as a function of the learner’s individual attributes nor only by attention given to linguistically comprehensible input. Instead, from an ecological perspective, it became evident that the whole context of activity (i.e., the practices of the community, others, objects, and so on) provided Juan with various types of physical, social, and linguistic/semiotic affordances with which to create and express meaning in his kindergarten classroom. We also emphasize that, in the case study presented, language learning was not merely a result of repetition or mimicking, but instead, it was an intentional, transformative, and complex process of meaning-making involving an understanding and creation of shared semiotic systems through joint participation in sign-mediated activities, or in van Lier’s (2004) words, “the whole [was] not only more than a sum of its parts, it [was] of different nature than its parts” (p. 5; see also DaSilva Iddings & McCafferty, 2005).

In addition, we argue that particular characteristics of the activities in which our focal student participated allowed the student to pass as an integral member of the classroom community and, thus, served to legitimize his identity as a student within the institutional context of school. In our observations, Juan clearly was concerned with being and acting as a student, blending into his community.

Although Juan might not have had the necessary linguistic base in the L2 to fully engage in the content of instruction, by participating in the various classroom practices that permitted him to establish joint-attentional frames (with the teacher and his peers), he was able to understand others’ communicative intentions—a prerequisite for language learning (Tomasello, 2003). Tomasello’s linguistic theories do not address all issues of ambiguity and the multiplicity of intentions conveyed in joint-attentional actions, however. We contend that these issues may pose considerable challenges to L2 learners in their quest for reconciling the learning of content (especially in abstraction) and actions in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

We believe that this study has been instrumental in providing opportunities for the reassessment of the silent period and in presenting a counter-argument to deficit perspectives that view emergent-level (or so-called silent) language learners as being unable to participate mean-
ingfully in classroom activities. We hope that our findings have helped illuminate the fact that during early phases of L2 development, although students may be primarily linguistically silent, they may also be extraordinarily psychologically active (see also Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) as they interact with new cultural contexts. Thus, for students undergoing the silent period, the joint-attentional frames that are formed through students’ participation in classroom tasks can serve as an important tool to mediate between language and the learners, and without this type of engagement in such tasks, meaning-making may be difficult to achieve.

As we have illustrated throughout this article, the teachers in our study were highly successful in promoting the learning of routines and procedures through the establishment of joint-attentional frames. However, our findings are in agreement with Toohey’s (1998) and Rymes and Pash’s (2001) critical examinations of highly routinized practices in the primary grades, claiming that although a strong emphasis on the procedural elements of the classroom may help L2 students in English-dominant classrooms pass as insiders and thus be better accepted in their classroom communities, it ultimately does not help these students develop valued academic competencies.

We note, for example, that Juan experienced an intense process of meaning-making, learned the most salient aspects of the classroom routines, and was remarkably competent in complying with the teachers’ utmost goal for the children in their class (that they learned to “act as students”). Nonetheless, Juan’s accomplishments during his first school year had been largely imperceptible to the teachers. From a perspective focusing on his shortfalls in English proficiency and literacy development, throughout the year Juan continued to be seen as a struggling learner and was retained in kindergarten for lack of academic progress. Clearly, not much attention was paid to the silent strides he was making toward future linguistic and social development. This fact suggests that students may be receiving mixed messages about what is meaningful to learn. Although much research continues to indicate that the main goal of kindergarten should be to develop school readiness by promoting an approach to learning that fosters curiosity, creativity, independence, cooperativeness, persistence, and self-regulatory behaviors (see Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Normandeau & Guay, 1998)—all characteristics that Juan demonstrated abundantly—in view of the recent accountability reforms (i.e., No Child Left Behind), emphasis in the primary grades has shifted to the mastery of academic content. In this way, much of what had traditionally been taught in first grade such as letter recognition, vocabulary, and early writing composition skills, is now (perhaps unfortunately) realized in kindergarten.

Thus, if that is the case, we suggest that closer attention be paid to creating pedagogical circumstances where joint-attentional frames are
established to allow students to learn academic content equally as well as procedures. For example, Nassaji and Cumming (2000) have demonstrated how a 6-year-old beginning-level ELL progressively achieved intricate communicative patterns of writing in English through his participation in ongoing dialogue journal exchanges with the teacher. These exchanges illustrated the establishment of joint-attentional frames between the student, the teacher, and the journal entries, an interconnection which ultimately worked to support the student’s development of academic writing and promoted and sustained a highly intersubjective relationship between the teacher and the student as well, further facilitating the L2 student’s understandings of the teacher’s intentionality.5

Our work in this article has sought to draw attention to the early stages of L2 acquisition so that we, as educators, can better understand how and what students may be learning during this period of silence. We hope this understanding helps create greater awareness about L2 learners’ potential and helps us to better support learners in their efforts to develop both socially and academically when placed in English-dominant classrooms.

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REFERENCES

5 See also Edelsky (1986) for a discussion of young bilingual learners’ participation in authentic reading and writing practices in a bilingual program, which appeared to promote the development of both procedural and content-related language skills for the learners.


