

# Can a sociolinguistic perspective of Second Language Acquisition solve ‘the longstanding human curiosity’ of learning languages?

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*The present paper looks into SLA research which has been overwhelmed with multitude of competing theories, thus making it plausible that none of them alone can explain the complex issue to a satisfying extent. Following the search for complementarity, this study seeks to show how a sociolinguistic approach contributes to the understanding of SLA, by pointing to gains as well as to limitations of applying only such an approach. Responding to the appeal for an enhancement of using sociolinguistic as well as socio-cognitive theories, this paper pursues this endeavour by critically analysing a sociolinguistic approach and zooming in on research on two articles – by Soltani (2018) and Anderson (2017) – about study abroad in Anglophone countries. The author argues that although the two studies are focused on a specific group of learners in specific circumstances and might not have contributed to an improvement in a narrow view of SLA, they have highlighted the need to put cognitive theories into a socialisation perspective and to recognise that similar issues might arise when other target groups such as EFL secondary school students go abroad on a school exchange and are confronted with socialisation into family, school or peers. The paper concludes that if sociolinguistic approaches seek a holistic account of the complexities of second language learning, they should adapt to new developments and collaborate with cognitive theories.*

**KEYWORDS:** SLA, second language acquisition, language socialisation, social turn, study abroad



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

How are languages learned? This ‘longstanding human curiosity’ (Thomas, 2013, p. 26) has ignited perennial debates and given birth to a plenitude of theories. There are, according to Long (1993), between 40 and 60 theories of how people acquire languages in addition to their mother tongue(s). Yet, he also acknowledges that some of

them should rather be called ‘theories in, not of SLA’ (Long, 1993, p. 226) and be placed in inverted commas as some resemble more models or hypotheses than theories (Long, 1993, p. 225). In the following, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to both the research field as well as the process and product of acquiring a second language (L2). Whereas this abundance and

diversity is appreciated by some researchers (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Ellis, 2008), it was already criticised by Long (1993) 25 years ago who cautioned against eclecticism and thus argued for a reduction based on a 'rational approach for theory assessment' (Long, 1993, p. 228).

According to Ortega (2013), this diversity arouses different feelings among scholars. Whereas some criticise it as theory proliferation, others appreciate it as 'intellectual ethos', and yet others see the need for reconceptualising the field (Ortega, 2013, p. 4). The number of theories has not dwindled, and therefore Myles (2013) seeks to group them into three 'main theoretical families', each highlighting a different focus: the linguistic theory with its focus on the formal system of learner language; the cognitive theory centring around the mental processes and psychological composition of individuals; and the interactionist, sociolinguistic and sociocultural theories focusing on the interactional and social context in which the learning of an L2 occurs (Myles, 2013, p. 52-70).

This classification contrasts slightly with the one put forward by Lightbown and Spada (2006), which lists behaviourist, innatist, cognitive/developmental and sociocultural perspectives. Yet, although any classification might run the risk of being too artificial, too simplistic, and not encompassing the whole picture, it allows a certain degree of orientation within the research

field of SLA (Myles, 2013, p. 53).

Given the fact that many researchers have been grappling with this conundrum of SLA and the multitude of competing theories, it could be plausible that none of them alone can explain the complex issue to a satisfying extent. Instead, each approach might have a certain right to exist and together they should rather try to complement than compete with each other. Notably, there are also SLA theories which are 'oppositional', not 'complementary' due to different domains or choice of variables, for instance (Long, 1993, p. 226).

Following the search for complementarity, this study seeks not to swing the pendulum of theories into the sociolinguistic area for good, but to show how a sociolinguistic approach contributes to the understanding of SLA, by pointing to gains as well as to limitations of applying only such an approach. As part of the search for complementarity, one also needs to be aware of the need for reconceptualising dated concepts and narrow terminology, of constant development of new theories and of the potentially detrimental dichotomy between cognitive and socially-situated theories.

In terms of future SLA research directions, Lafford (2007) calls for an enhancement of using sociolinguistic as well as socio-cognitive theories.

This paper will pursue this endeavour by critically analysing a sociolinguistic approach and zooming in on research on two articles – by Soltani (2018) and Anderson (2017) – about study abroad in Anglophone countries. Within this context, both studies are grounded within the broad framework of language socialisation, but the authors develop new adaptations of it by combining it with philosophical concepts. The underlying explanation is that language socialisation is the ‘overarching theoretical paradigm’ and that it will be ‘interpreted from a social space perspective’ (Soltani, 2018, p. 21). Thus, Anderson (2017) coins the term *the doctoral gaze*, drawing on Foucault’s (1995) notion of *panopticism*, whereas Soltani (2018) invents the phrase *the academic social space*, inspired by Lefebvre’s (1991) *production of space*.

In these two articles, in short, different developments of the same sociolinguistic framework are applied to roughly the same target group, i.e. postgraduate students at Master’s and PhD levels in similar research and practice sites (Anglophone universities, but in different continents). This promises more depth in the analysis of their common aim, i.e. shedding light on international students’ varying success in second language socialisation at Anglophone universities. This analysis of insights into language learner, language learning, target language and context is embedded in the social turn and in two

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of the latest social developments, i.e. ongoing globalisation, which is the ‘intensification of worldwide social relations’ (Block & Cameron, 2002, p. 1), and the increasing internationalisation of universities (Kinging, 2010). Globalisation and the social turn have influenced sociolinguistics tremendously (Hornberger & McKay, 2010). Furthermore, research in the field of language socialisation within study abroad settings is still a new and infrequent enterprise (Kinging, 2017). Study abroad is defined as ‘a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes’ (Kinging, 2009, p. 11). These sojourns thus highlight academic objectives (Duff & May, 2017) and are by and large considered one of the major means of producing foreign language speakers and enhancing foreign language learning, which goes hand in hand with the focus of field of SLA, i.e. learning and learners (VanPatten & Benati, 2015).

## 2. SOCIOLINGUISTICS MEETS SLA:

### SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORIES OF/IN/TO SLA

#### 2.1 Limits of sociolinguistic approaches

What is sociolinguistic theory of/in/to SLA? Which preposition is more appropriate: of, in or to?

Theories *in SLA* might stress the variety of theories, whereas *of SLA* could sound more exclusive and prescriptive, and *to SLA* might stress the process of the language acquisition. But these are only personal perceptions and ideas, and in the following, they will be used interchangeably. The adjective 'sociolinguistic' is a derivation of adding the prefix 'socio-' to the noun 'linguistics', thus, appending a semantic modification and specification to the vast field of linguistics. As a result, sociolinguistics is concerned with the '*relations between the use of language and the social structure in which the language users live*' (Zhang & Wang, 2016, p. 830). But what exactly is the intersection of SLA and sociolinguistics?

In his article *Sociolinguistic Approaches to SLA*, Young (1999) encapsulates the problem. Although a certain popularity of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA in the last couple of years can be seen, which has led to researchers adopting '*by and large the methods of mainstream sociolinguists*' (Young, 1999, p. 106), these sociolinguistic approaches lack an all-embracing, coherent and explicit theory. This ties in with what Ellis (2008) says almost ten years later. He

concludes that sociolinguistic SLA does not possess 'a single, homogenous line of enquiry' but rather numerous various approaches (Ellis, 2008, p. 280). Some of them are variability in second language use, power relations, second language socialisation, communities of practice and situated L2 learning, learning and the (re)construction of identity, and the impact of affect and emotions (Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2013). In spite of the different foci of interest, their common denominator is the social context in which learners learn a new language, hence the prefix. In the book *Second Language Learning Theories* (Mitchell et al., 2013), the chapter *Sociolinguistic Perspectives* – note the use of 'perspectives' instead of 'theory' and the choice of plural – also fails to provide a definition. It only refers to it as '*the relationship between sociolinguistics and second language learning theory*' (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 250).

In sum, due to the lack of one overarching theory and the occurrence of a plenitude of approaches with different foci, it might be more appropriate – even almost 20 years after Young's (1999) analysis – to use the plural as in perspectives, approaches or theories.

#### 2.2 Framing the context for perceived imbalance

The expression 'perceived imbalance' is taken from Larsen-Freeman's (2007) review of Firth and Wagner's (1997) postulation. The field of SLA has

been coloured by the ongoing discussion over whether acquisition is an individual/cognitive or a social/contextual endeavour, i.e. focusing on whether it takes place in the mind of the learner or by using the L2 with other L2 interlocutors in social contexts (Larsen-Freeman, 2007). The rivalry of the different ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of these theories, also called the cognitive-social divide (Geeslin & Long, 2014), peaked in 1997 when Firth and Wagner criticised the dominance of cognitive-oriented approaches at a conference. Furthermore, they called for redressing this (perceived) imbalance in order to increase the *'awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use'* (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 285), pursue a *'more socially and contextually situated view'* (Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. 773) of learning an L2, and adapt an *'increased emic sensitivity towards fundamental concepts'* (Lafford, 2007, p. 736) – the view which is followed by the sociolinguistic theory of SLA.

Even though Firth and Wagner did not initiate this debate, as research into previous publications has shown (Lafford, 2007), and received varying reactions (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) to their postulations, this day kindled an increased interest into the impact of social circumstances on the learning and use of L2, widened the hitherto epistemological limitedness in the SLA field, raised awareness of these contrasting theories and

opened the door to the social turn. The social turn welcomed disregarded concepts such as *context, agency, variability, self-in-the-world, and power* (Ortega, 2017, p. 289), hierarchy or access to language exposure, which are tackled by sociolinguistic theory. The learner is not stigmatised as the deficient opposite of the native speaker anymore.

Still today, however, the relationship between socially-oriented and cognitive SLA scholars is described as one of *'competition and controversy'* (Véronique, 2013, p. 253). Might Firth and Wagner's call to redress the imbalance have in fact been a disguised challenge and attempt to swing the pendulum in the other direction and achieve a dominance for socially-oriented theories? There are some researchers who impute it as *'making a bid for the supremacy of an entirely different approach to SLA'* (Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. 773). Yet, it must be noted that it is rather unclear what Larsen-Freeman means by saying *'entirely different approach'*. The adverb *'entirely'* could also hint at a theory not yet seen in the field of SLA.

### **2.3 Language socialisation as theoretical framework**

Both studies I chose draw upon language socialisation (LS) as their overarching theoretical framework. According to Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003), LS adds *'the most to an*

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*understanding of the cognitive, cultural, social, and political complexity of language learning'* (Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003, p. 155). This citation already hints at the variety of issues LS deals with. This paper will especially stress the last three complexities as they are highlighted in the studies, but it will also demonstrate the necessity of considering the cognitive aspect.

LS is best summarised by the quite poststructuralist phrase '*socialisation through the use of language and socialisation to use language*' (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 163), which rejects a purely cognitive approach to language learning and highlights the inextricably intertwined nexus of sociocultural and linguistic knowledge and practices. It is closely linked with Communities of Practice (CoP) described by Lave and Wenger (1991), which stresses the fact that the process of language learning is socially situated in communities sharing a common interest. Ellis (2008) remarks that these concepts cannot be clearly distinguished from each other. Lave and

Wenger (1991) argue that by participating in typical routine activities of the community novices have increased possibilities to use the language of the community and by using language they become familiar with these practices. As a result, they not only acquire communicative competence, but also legitimacy and membership in this group (Duff, 2007). This is the desired case, however. The worst case is that either the experts are reluctant to socialise the newcomers and confront the learners with gatekeepers, or the latter group is not fully invested in the process. When successful, this process leads to re-conceptualising identities, hierarchies and cultures and is thus a constant site of struggle and development.

### **3. RECONCEPTUALISING OLD SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCEPTS**

#### **3.1 Coining new sociolinguistic concepts**

In the following, the two previously mentioned studies from the same journal *Linguistics and Education* will be presented. First, they will be compared across some very basic categories, and the different interpretations of language socialisation theory will be elucidated. In a second step, these findings will be discussed within a broader context as to how they contribute to new insights or confirm old insights into the learning of L2, language learners, target language and context through the lenses of a sociolinguistic approach. The following table serves as an overview to compare the key features of the studies (Table 1).

Table 1

*Comparison of the key aspects of the two studies*

	STUDY 1	STUDY 2
TITLE	The doctoral gaze: foreign PhD students' internal and external academic discourse socialisation	Academic socialisation as the production and negotiation of social space
AUTHOR	Tim Anderson	Behnam Soltani
YEAR OF PUBLICATION	2017	2018
CONTEXT	Research-intensive university in Canada	Research-intensive university in New Zealand
PARTICIPANT(S)	7 PhD students, Chinese	Kevin: international student,
DURATION	16 months	3 semesters
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	- Language Socialisation - Community of Practice - Internal/External Socialisation - Panopticism (Foucault)	- Language Socialisation - Community of Practice - Production of space (Lefebvre)
NEW CONCEPT	Doctoral gaze	Academic social space
DESIGN	Multiple-case study	Ethnographic, qualitative, multiple case study
DATA	- two semi-structured interviews with every participant - participant-generated written narratives throughout the study - voluntarily submitted samples of written feedback from supervisors	- weekly observations of classes (video/audio taped) - weekly self-reports - weekly/fortnightly interviews (semi-structured, open-ended)

Both scholars resort to French philosophers of the 20th century to modify the socialisation theory and create new concepts. Anderson (2017) refers to post-structuralist Foucault's notion of 'panopticism' and coins 'the doctoral gaze' in order to uncover '*real and imagined disciplinary*

*powers that influence doctoral students' internal and external socialisation in their desired academic discourses and community'* (Anderson, 2017, p. 3). Soltani (2018), by contrast, modifies Marxist Lefebvre's concept 'triads of space' (perceived, conceived, lived) and invents 'the academic social

space', i.e. *'where academic socialisation gives shape to social space, which is the interplay between physical and mental spaces wrapped around all socio-economic relations'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 22). Lefebvre's 'perceived' refers to the design, concept and arrangement of the university and the classrooms, i.e. what furniture is used and how it is organised. Conceived refers to 'conceived space', which includes the notions of space which are built on dominant systems of knowledge. 'Lived' space refers to *'Kevin's lived experiences in which he negotiates his identity and desires in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 24). This combination of SLA and philosophical tenets shows a transdisciplinary endeavour.

Anderson's (2017) framework seeks not only to voice the actual, explicit and observable behaviours and influences of doctoral students' socialisation but also the implicit, perceived and imagined. He demonstrates how much power the omnipresent unseen gaze has on their internal socialisation processes. The frequent use of 'imagined', 'imagining', 'unseen', 'hypothetical' and 'perceptions' shows that the power of imagination has a tremendous impact on students' feelings and agentic behaviours. Hence, Anderson brings to light the hidden pressure on students. Soltani's (2018) framework aims at a holistic view of the multiple stakeholders – visible and invisible – involved in the learning process.

The interdependency of all participants is brought to the fore, and thus language learning through socialisation is not a one-way street. He explores how space and power relations (visible and invisible) are either gatekeepers or door openers for success in academic socialisation and thus makes the top-down hierarchy obvious. Hence, it broadens the horizon of SLA and sociolinguistic theories by voicing the inaudible and invisible of the backstage, i.e. those implications and influences that the students are not often aware of. Especially, as an example of the 'backstage' the interviews with the EAP director, which are not the focus of Soltani's study, offer rich insights into the invisible influences behind learning.

Soltani (2018) illustrates the interrelationship between identity, hierarchical powers and agency, which are illuminated and influenced by his three kinds of space, whereas Anderson (2017) sketches the interdependency between doctoral gaze, identity and agency. Both frameworks consider academia as a community of practice and both scholars track the development of their students over a long-time span and are thus process-oriented.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Language learner

*'Opening the Pandora's box of the social dimension of language acquisition'* (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007, p. 918) does not imply negative

repercussions, but has in fact contributed to our understanding of the learning of second languages viewing it through sociolinguistic studies.

In the following, the two studies will be analysed and discussed – not necessarily in equal measure – along four specific lenses that I have called: language learner, language learning, target language and context. I acknowledge that these four areas are sometimes hard to separate from each other, which, however, results from their interrelatedness. These thematic units will serve as tools through which the thinking behind sociolinguistic theories is portrayed. They will also allow me to try to develop insights into second language learning further.

Both studies reveal an emic perspective, as requested by Firth and Wagner (1997). Soltani (2018) tracks the particular language learning process of Kevin, and Anderson (2017) uses a multiple-case study to study *'unique people with individualised experiences'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 3). For the purposes of this analysis, Kevin will always refer to Soltani's (2018) study, while the other first names (e.g. Sissy, Qui, A-Ming, Polar Bear) refer to Anderson's (2017) participants. Playing devil's advocate, the following question has to be asked: is not everyone unique and individual? Yes, but this has not come to the fore for a long time within cognitive theories. Therefore, sociolinguistic theories or scholars might seek to distance

themselves from cognitive theory by putting even more emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual and removing other foci. In this way, Soltani's sentence could be seen as an example of a Firth-and-Wagner-led paradigm shift.

Another aspect in common is their focus on the active part of the learner who does not only react, but also acts. Kevin initiates discussions or seeks ideas from his classmates (Soltani, 2018, p. 25). He seeks as much language exposure as possible and thus talks English even during breaks. This ties in with Schieffelin and Ochs' (1986) notion of a learner within the socialisation context who is described as *'not a passive recipient of sociocultural knowledge but rather an active contributor to the meaning and outcome of interactions with other members of a social group'* (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 165). This social group is the community of practice, the university.

Yet, Kevin also reacts – but to difficulties or gatekeepers in order to reshape his learning process. Having difficulties with oral communication skills, he resorts to Facebook, which circumvents the immediateness of spoken language and allows him more time and opportunities. This shows that he makes choices and looks for solutions. He employs *'various strategies to deal with his problems'*, e.g. asking tutors (Soltani, 2018, p. 29). This is not only

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closely related to the concept of learning strategies but also to the sociolinguistic concept of agency, i.e. the speaker is 'someone who acts through speaking and thus becomes a social actor' (Kern & Liddicoat, 2010, p.19). Kevin made use of 'his agency to (re)position himself more favourably' (Soltani, 2018, p. 29) and by contributing to conversations, he won 'membership and audibility' (Soltani, 2018, p. 28). Therefore, the learner shapes himself and is shaped by others and social space. He is influenced by social context (indirectly and directly). A-Ming also demonstrated a high amount of agency, which facilitated his self-socialisation into categories that prove beneficial for overcoming problems and increasing academic success (Anderson, 2017, p. 8).

The studies acknowledge that learners are affective social beings and possess emotions, feelings and perceptions which impact their learning process positively as well as negatively. Jojo felt happy and valued when a researcher was interested in her work, which boosted her confidence and

encouragement (Anderson, 2017, p. 5). This hints at motivation, one of several individual learner differences. Polar Bear, for instance, suffered enormously from imagined pressure that is exerted upon him by his colleagues (Anderson, 2017, p. 9). When Kevin had language problems and did not have friends in his mainstream programme, he lacked confidence and became silent which contrasts with his feelings in his EAP course (Soltani, 2018, p. 26).

Furthermore, identity is in constant flux and hybrid (Myles, 2013, p. 66). Therefore, it is comprehensible why Soltani uses the plural *identities* (Soltani, 2018, p. 26-29). Even Kevin says about himself that he is 'another Kevin' (Soltani, 2018, p. 26). Analysing Kevin shows that identities can even be oppositional: talker vs listener (Soltani, 2018, p. 26-28). These identities are constructed by oneself but also by others; 'others constructed him as ...' (Soltani, 2018, p. 25). Several instances of internal sources of socialisation and thus identification due to the omnipresent unseen gaze (Anderson, 2017) can be explained. In Anderson's (2017) study, Sissy embodied the 'identity of inadequate writer' (Anderson, 2017, p. 8) and included herself in the imagined collective international student group also called 'we', that were inferior to domestic students, named 'them'. This projection of her own flaws onto a larger group reduces her own responsibility and might be a way to

circumvent the pressing doctoral gaze (Anderson, 2017, p. 8). Also, Polar Bear compares himself to the others by positioning himself into the 'category of non-expert or lesser-expert' (Anderson, 2017, p. 7). These instances of self-ascribed deficit identities highlight that the dichotomy of non-native speaker (NNS) and native speaker (NS) seems still alive in international students' minds. Within cognitive theory, learners used to be stigmatised as the deficient non-native speaker (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007, p. 908), which was criticised by Firth and Wagner (1997). However, it is no longer in the heads of sociolinguistic scholars of SLA. For example, Soltani (2018) tries to avoid negative labelling by using 'social agent' or 'Kevin'. Also, external sources of socialisation can contribute to new identities. Sissy felt discriminated by being identified only in terms her being Asian (Anderson, 2017, p. 6). Even a university can have an identity. Soltani's (2018) research site identifies itself as 'western' and expects its students to adopt this identity (Soltani, 2018, p. 24).

Both studies show that language learners vary inter- and intrapersonally, which, I think, hints at sociolinguistic theory embracing the notion of individual learner differences. This ties in with what Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) say, i.e. people's *'perceptions and conceptions of entities are grounded in their subjective experiences and that members bring somewhat different realities to*

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*interpersonal encounters'* (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 165). This is portrayed by the different reactions to negative feedback when Qui does not take it personally, but appreciates it as constructive feedback (Anderson, 2017, p. 7). Not only do learners' proficiencies vary between each other, but also within one person. Kevin has *'oral communication problems'* whereas he is good at writing and thus, acts as *'an effective member of his online social space'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 28).

This view of language learners contrasts starkly with cognitive theory, which portrays them as, using deliberately my very provocative description, identity-free computers, automatically internalising linguistic knowledge without negotiating meaning or considering context.

#### **4.2 Language learning**

Language learning is using the language with interlocutors, and thus, it is not an individual, but an 'interactive' endeavour, which can be dialogic or polylogic (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 165). It may take place between Qui's and her supervisor

(Anderson, 2017, p. 7) or between Kevin and his classmates (Soltani, 2018, p. 25), which shows that it is not only between novices and experts but also between non-native novices. Also within the CoP of novices, there is socialisation where one helps the other and a new hierarchy is established. As Soltani points out, Kevin '*constructed himself as a more knowledgeable member of his classroom*' (Soltani, 2018, p. 25).

Language use is seen as the 'driver of language development' (Myles, 2013, p. 67). Kevin used English as a means to communicate even 'during breaks' (Soltani, 2018, p. 25) and consequently increased his output.

It is considered a process, rather than a product, which can be inhibited by social factors, context or linguistic difficulties. Kevin struggles to understand the New Zealand accent and to communicate 'with the locals' (Soltani, 2018, p. 25). This prevents him from accessing language exposure and learning possibilities. Thus, he misses on the culture being transmitted through local practices and language. As Véronique (2013) puts it, as soon as second language learners are 'estranged from the target society', they are confronted with 'gate-keeping procedures' (Véronique, 2013, p. 261). Also 'unfamiliarity' with the academic discourse can impede the process and thus, motivation is not sufficient anymore (Soltani, 2018, p. 27). These

inhibiting factors lead to a lack of group membership and to a marginal and silent position within academia. Yet, membership and audibility are important and show in Kevin's case that the more these two aspects are fulfilled, the more language is negotiated in this community of practice. '*Membership and audibility refers to 'the degree to which language learners are regarded as legitimate'*' (Soltani, 2018, p. 28). This might hint at language level and atmosphere in the classroom being influential and being somehow interconnected. This would tie in with Wang's (2010) findings that '*language socialisation, identity, and academic achievement are closely interconnected*' (Wang, 2010, p. 58). But what exactly is academic achievement? Is it perfect socialisation into the CoP? Is it obtaining a first-class degree? Is it measured cognitively? Wang's statement implies that academic achievement is mediated by the sociolinguistic concept of agency and the institution, i.e. social academic space.

The variety of contextual influences and individual differences make language learning unpredictable and subject to constant fluctuation and variation. Soltani's study shows a complete change of language investment due to a change of social spaces (Soltani, 2018, p. 28). Further, it is difficult to isolate which of the contextual factors contributed most to language learning or whether it was the interplay of many social and individual factors.

L2 learning and use can be concerned with *'becoming a member of a new social community not about the internalisation of linguistic patterns'* (Véronique, 2013, p. 254). This strong, thought-provoking statement is in opposition to the cognitive view of acquisition as an *'internalisation of linguistic system'* (VanPatten & Benati, 2015, p. 89) and SLA as *'the study of how learners create a new language system'* (Gass et al., 2013, p.1). Soltani (2018) describes second language learning as *'a process of identity negotiation in social space where individuals struggle to learn the norms of their new social space by taking part in the practices of their new academic social space'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 29). This new academic space, academia, is also their new community of practice. Looking at Soltani's definition, he positions himself as a sociolinguistic theorist for whom identity building and social dimensions are of utmost importance for language learning. This is also true for Anderson – both stress the fact that learners encounter problems when embarking on their language journey in studies abroad.

### 4.3 Target language

Both studies explain that English has many faces due to diatopic, diastratic or diaphasic variation, which can be best studied from a sociolinguistic view. Diatopic variation is present in both studies – Canadian English and New Zealand accents – which poses problems for learners. Though not

explicitly stated, Kevin's language problems during his mainstream programme might be ascribed to diastratic and diaphasic variation that native speakers use in oral communication. This shows that language use is embedded in and changes through social context. The English language is also affected by the medium, whether it is a written or an oral discourse.

When teaching English as a Foreign Language, teachers are often obliged to use either BrE or AmE and thus, students face many new Englishes during their stay abroad. Therefore, curricula and teachers should raise awareness of the different faces of English. World Englishes are on the rise and with the increasing early study abroad in countries like Singapore the norm will get blurred. The demystification of the homogenous native-speaker-norm is essential.

### 4.4 Context

Context encompasses many aspects. Of course, it refers to the dichotomy instructed vs. non-instructed setting or to instances of blurring which can be seen in the two studies that are set within studies abroad. But it also includes human and non-human aspects.

The quality of relationships with people in the class and the resulting atmosphere can either boost or hamper language learning, performance and identity construction. When Kevin felt

comfortable among his classmates, who were his 'friends', he was perceived as an effective member (Soltani, 2018, p. 25) and felt confident. Yet, in his mainstream programme he was not able to bond with the other students who he described as 'them' and had language difficulties which led to negative effects on his performance. Furthermore, native speakers are not a warrant for successful language learning if they do not nurture the newcomers properly. They may even be hindering the L2 learners through the doctoral gaze, the omnipresent disciplinary control that leads Sasha to her 'obsession' with writing English texts without any errors (Anderson, 2017, p. 9).

Soltani (2018) adds another dimension, and illuminates hierarchies omnipresent in learning contexts. His triads of social space are a fine tool to analyse the power and impact of space on learning possibilities.

His first space is classroom as perceived space, which shows how the arrangement of furniture can create different learning situations. In this university, the arrangement of furniture should not resemble a testing situation but be set-up in U-shaped forms or groups so that the students could communicate with each other. The teacher moved around and was not static, which portrays him as the guide on the side, not sage on the stage. But also, course material belongs to this space. Kevin admits that *'facilities make people more willing to*

*study'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 26). This shows that objects can regulate learner's behaviour such as a syllabus or programme.

His second space is the university's conceived space, which *'implies how experts think and imagine the place to be and explains what needs to be done to produce the kind of students to build the kind of society that is expected by the dominant people'* (Soltani, 2018, p. 24). In my opinion, this shows a top-down hierarchy and the underlying implications and thoughts that students are often not aware of – teachers and especially students only see the frontstage behaviour, but not the backstage (thoughts, laws). To me, Soltani makes the invisible visible and explains that also teachers are restricted in their offer of learning possibilities by policy makers, or the university. It seems as if everyone is expected to perform a certain role that he has been given. Anderson's doctoral gaze brings a new touch to it.

International students also feel as if they have to perform a particular role and show constantly good performance. They have internalised the pressure and expectations of the conceived space. The university expects its students to adopt the Western way (Soltani, 2018, p. 24). I think, the conceived space also hints at the difference between which aspects of these expectations are articulated and which not, thus, what reaches the bottom of the line (i.e. learner) and what not. Effects may be pressure or helplessness – and

*‘To me, Soltani makes the invisible visible and explains that also teachers are restricted in their offer of learning possibilities by policy makers, or the university’*

Anderson’s concept of the omnipresent doctoral gaze. Thus, expectations must be laid on the line and explained. Soltani (2018) notes that each department has its own rules and norms. Cultural knowledge is needed to decipher them.

Soltani’s third concept of space is lived space, which centres around students’ lived experiences in which they negotiate their identities and aspirations while being surrounded by *‘complex and often unequal social relationships’* (Soltani, 2018, p. 24). To sum up, *‘asymmetrical distribution of knowledge and power influence the interactions in particular ways’* (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 166). Anderson’s (2017) study portrays this, as international students feel inferior to their domestic colleagues due to their lack of language proficiency, and thus power – language is (still and will always be) power. Anderson’s doctoral gaze can be analysed within Soltani’s concept of lived space.

The context of pursuing a degree at a foreign university might not be fitting for improving one’s

grammar skills (Soltani, 2018, p. 25) since the interactions in this setting focus on meaning instead of form. Yet, this is a bit contradictory as having a proper grammatical knowledge often helps in becoming a legitimate member of the community, especially in academia.

### 5. SYNTHESIS: NEW FRAMEWORK?

These two studies offer rich and holistic views of international graduate and PhD students at Anglophone tertiary institutes. They bring to light aspects of language learning unseen by different people. Soltani (2018) shows what students often do not see, i.e. decisions of policy makers or the university, whilst Anderson (2017) sheds light on the processes of international students’ internal socialisation that are usually invisible to teachers and peers, especially domestic fellow students. These scholars thus raise awareness of these invisibilities so that everyone involved in the language socialisation process can bear them in mind when interacting with other people of this specific setting and evaluating their behaviours.

When analysing socialisation of EAL graduate students at Anglophone universities using this new framework, employing longitudinal and ethnographic methods, it is important to consider the macro-context of the country, the university and the programme as well as the micro-context of interpersonal (between professors, fellow students) and intrapersonal relations (e.g. individual

differences). The combination of the new notions of 'academic social space' and 'doctoral gaze' might be a good tool to highlight both visible and invisible forces and implications of socialisation that impact the language learning process of this specific group in this particular setting. For this setting, the four areas – language learner, language learning, target language and context – are essential when aiming at the big picture of language learning through sociolinguistic lenses. Insights from these four themes could contribute to improvements in teaching second languages and lead to better understanding of possible reasons for successful or unsuccessful learning. Although SLA focuses on learning and learners (VanPatten & Benati, 2015, p. 1), I think that teaching and supervisors, lecturers and professors in the setting of the studies, should not be excluded in research on SLA. Since sociolinguistic theories consider language learning strategies and learner differences, it is important to discuss whether it could be useful to think about 'language socialisation (learning) strategies' (as I would call them), which would help international students socialise into their new academic social space.

A new framework would also have to end the 'schizophrenic situation', as Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) describe it, between cognitive and socially-oriented scholars and instead seek collaboration to find solutions to limitations of the sociolinguistic approaches such as the explanation of the

individual mental processes of language learning (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012, p. 405). This would embrace the complexity of SLA which is described by Duff (2008) as an interplay of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social processes.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the sociolinguistic theory of SLA, and LS in particular, have not yet been fully exploited by far and could offer a more holistic account of how students struggle to become a legitimate member of the academic community of practice at foreign universities. Although the two studies are focused on a specific group of learners in specific circumstances and might not have contributed to an improvement in a narrow view of SLA, they have reminded us to put cognitive theories into a socialisation perspective and to recognise that similar issues might arise when other target groups such as EFL secondary school students go abroad on a school exchange and are confronted with socialisation into family, school or peers. Thus, these sociolinguistic studies have also reacted to new societal developments such as globalisation and increasing internationalisation of education. For example, the recent growth in Early Study Abroad already hints at new challenges of the future. As Song (2011) puts it, '*when these families return to their home EFL context, they also transport practices and views that they have adopted in their hosting ESL context*' (Song, 2011, p. 753) and thus, they blur the distinction between

EFL and ESL. This, however, reveals that policy-making, teaching and research have to assist these learners and their teachers. It also implies that a narrowness of definitions is not always useful, i.e. FL vs SL, SLA of/in/to or instructed vs naturalistic, for instance.

How can sociolinguistic theories cater for this and other developments? In general, sociolinguistic approaches have the distinct advantage of offering a wide range of foci such as variability, identity, power relations and socialisation – concepts that are essential for the ever-growing diversity of L2 learning. Nevertheless, it has also been shown that sociolinguistic approaches cannot really account for internal processes of learning and should therefore engage with cognitive-oriented scholars and theories. Furthermore, it has been illustrated that reconceptualising old concepts can make them more fitting for present and future developments.

Yet, caution is advised. The two studies are not the first to illustrate that researchers tend to create new models and theories – by building on and combining previous concepts – in order to advance the field as well as to advance their own status within the research field. However, theories are not written for researchers but to meet the demands of language learners and to improve their language learning. Nevertheless, this theory proliferation and coinage of new models illustrates

that the field of SLA in general and of sociolinguistic theories in particular will always be (and need to be) reconceptualised.

Soltani (2018) and Anderson (2017) have shown with their studies, which have clearly engaged in the social turn and reacted to Firth and Wagner's (1997) requests, that sociolinguistic theories are able to describe as well as explain second language learning and that sociolinguistic theories could thus, according to the definition of Myles et al. (2013), be entitled to be theories. They illustrate that social contexts may offer a wide range of learning opportunities that can or cannot be seized by social agents. This reciprocity of social context and social beings, summarised as 'socio-', is negotiated through the target language (i.e. 'linguistic') and can lead to linguistic as well as non-linguistic outcomes. These negotiations ultimately and consistently influence the context, the interlocutors and the outcome as well as vice versa – they are invariably interrelated and interdependent.

To conclude, I will not propose a new model but come back to the beginning. If sociolinguistic approaches seek a holistic account of the complexities of second language learning, then they should adapt to new developments and collaborate with cognitive theories – otherwise, they might not be able to satisfy 'the longstanding human curiosity'.

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