PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA DE CHILE
FACULTAD DE EDUCACIÓN

Languages for Learning

Lenguajes para el aprendizaje

Alejandra Meneses A.[1], Evelyn Hugo R.[1] & Paola Uccelli[2]

[1]Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Facultad de Educación
[2]Harvard Graduate School of Education

Abstract

Academic practices often come into conflict with vernacular practices. However, from a sociocultural and pragmatic approach, it has been shown that language develops throughout education due to the children and young people's participation across different permeable and interdependent communicative contexts. This thematic issue includes nine papers that examine the relations between languages and learning—going beyond the simple dichotomy of «in-school and out-of-school». From a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives, the studies address languages situated, emphasizing the *register*, the *discursive genre*, or the *disciplinary field*. Some of the studies highlight verbal language learning from the receptive or productive perspective, while others focus on the interactions between modalities and semiotic modes for the construction of different genres. The papers also conceptualize learning in different ways. It is argued that language development serves as a precursor and continues as a coordinated and crucial evolutionary process for learning to read and write. Some of the authors propose that language knowledge facilitates learning, as they underline the epistemic potential of reading and writing as a tool for reflection. The study of learning is also extended beyond the school institution, exploring cultural practices in digital spaces. The papers offer results that contribute to the field of research on language development and its teaching and outline the implications for pedagogical practices since they make the role of languages in the construction of learning more explicit, based on the valuation of linguistic, contextual, and cultural diversity.

Key words: language, learning, literacy, multimodality, discursive genres, registers

Post to:

Alejandra Meneses
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Facultad de Educación, Departamento de Didáctica
Av. Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Oficina 01, Macul, Santiago, RM, 7820436, Chile
amenesea@uc.cl
(+56-2) 2354-5335
orcid.org/0000-0002-6563-5117

Resumen

Con frecuencia se oponen las prácticas académicas a las vernáculas; sin embargo, desde una aproximación sociocultural y pragmática, se ha demostrado que el lenguaje se desarrolla a lo largo de la escolaridad a partir de la participación de los niños, niñas y jóvenes en diferentes contextos comunicativos permeables e interdependientes. Este número temático incluye nueve artículos que desarrollan relaciones entre lenguajes y aprendizajes –más allá de la dicotomía «dentro y fuera de la escuela»–. Desde diversas perspectivas teóricas y metodológicas, las investigaciones abordan los lenguajes situadamente, con énfasis en el *registro*, en el *género discursivo* o en el *campo disciplinar*. Algunos estudios destacan el aprendizaje del lenguaje verbal desde lo receptivo o lo productivo; otros, las interacciones entre modalidades y modos semióticos para la construcción de diversos géneros. Asimismo, los artículos conceptualizan el aprendizaje de maneras diferentes. Se argumenta que el desarrollo del lenguaje sirve de precursor y continúa como proceso evolutivo conjunto y crucial para el aprendizaje de la lectura y escritura. Algunos proponen que el conocimiento del lenguaje es un facilitador del aprendizaje, ya que subrayan el potencial epistémico de la lectura y escritura como herramienta de reflexión. También se amplía el estudio del aprendizaje más allá de la institución escolar, pues se investiga acerca de prácticas culturales en espacios digitales. Los estudios presentan resultados que aportan al campo del desarrollo del lenguaje y de su enseñanza, y tienen implicancias para la práctica pedagógica, ya que explicitan el papel de los lenguajes en la construcción de los aprendizajes, desde la valoración de la diversidad lingüística, contextual y cultural.

Palabras clave: lenguaje, aprendizaje, literacidad, multimodalidad, géneros discursivos, registros

School is a sociocultural space in which learning is co-constructed through the mediation of verbal language (Grøver, Uccelli, Rowe, & Lieven, 2019; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009) and its interaction with other semiotic modes in which visual language plays an essential role (Macken-Horarik, Love, Sandiford, & Unsworth, 2017; Unsworth & Cleirigh, 2009). Simultaneously, outside the school space, children and young people participate in and co-construct complex literacy practices that are mediated by different semiotic modes and media to achieve a wide variety of communicative objectives (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Buckingham, 2006; Burnett & Merchant, 2015; Mills, Unsworth, & Exley, 2018).

Although there has been a tendency to establish an antagonism between academic and vernacular practices, from a sociocultural and pragmatic approach, current research has shown that language develops throughout education as a consequence of the participation and interaction of children and young people in different communicative contexts that are permeable and interdependent (Berman & Ravid, 2009; Grøver, et al., 2019; Nippold, 2007; Uccelli, 2019). The discursive genres that circulate in different contexts (e.g., comments on memes on social media, discussions on history texts) are characterized not only by the development of specific topics but also by the recurrent use of certain discursive and linguistic resources to achieve particular objectives for speech communities. Therefore, language learning is understood as the expansion of *rhetorical flexibility*, i.e., the progressive enlargement of linguistic resources to navigate an increasing variety of pragmatic contexts (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002). From this perspective, learning of language continues to develop significantly during adolescence and throughout

life with the teaching of new discursive registers and genres that not only expand the linguistic and discursive repertoires, but also enhance skills of metalinguistic reflection for active and critical participation in a diversity of social and cultural spaces (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002; Uccelli, Phillips Galloway, & Qin, 2020).

This thematic issue of Pensamiento Educativo, Revista de Investigación Educacional Latinoamericana, stems from the interest in bringing together studies in both Spanish and English that explore the relations between language and learning in different settings. The papers in this issue are written from a wide variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives with the aim of stimulating discussion on languages for learning, from a position that allows us to reconsider the dichotomy of «in-school and out-of-school».

Going beyond their distinctions and emphases, the studies in this issue share a sociocultural and functional approach to language (Berman & Ravid, 2009; Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Language is conceptualized as a repertoire of discursive and linguistic resources used—orally or in writing—by speakers who simultaneously construct meaning, establish social relationships, and negotiate identities through the production or interpretation of different discursive genres.

It is recognized that people have always materialized their discourse not merely using words, but also through other semiotic modes such as the visual; however, only in recent decades has empirical research begun to investigate the role of these "other" languages in learning spaces and their relations with verbal language (Unsworth & Cleirigh, 2009). Therefore, in this thematic issue, we address languages in the plural since learning is co-constructed by the interaction between various semiotic modes. Likewise, these languages allow the flexible construction of meanings between settings because of the permeability of their boundaries, which enables exchange and dynamism between spaces, rather than a division between in-school and out-of-school.

This issue includes nine studies organized according to educational level. The research covers the levels from kindergarten to the first year of university, with the studies on elementary education emphasizing reading and those focused on secondary education paying greater attention to writing.

The study by Silva and Jéldrez analyzes the preferences for narrative or informational books among a sample of Chilean children at two points at the beginning of formal learning to read: kindergarten and first grade. This research provides evidence that challenges the deep-rooted idea that children tend to prefer narrative books in early development of reading. The authors found a significant preference for informational texts rather than narrative books in kindergarten, while the children's preferences were more balanced in first grade. This paper underlines the importance of both narrative and informational books being included in the repertoire available to children who are beginning to read if their interests are to be met. The authors emphasize the need for children to be in contact with informational texts from the early years to become familiar with the language of these texts, since are strongly linked to learning in different disciplines (e.g., science and history texts) and have linguistic and discursive resources that distinguish them from narrative texts, the learning of which is important in the transition to more advanced grades.

Taboada Barber, Vizcaya, and Lutz's paper explores the contribution of Theory of Mind (ToM)—a socio-cognitive skill that allows people's behavior to be explained based on their beliefs, mental states, and desires—to listening and reading comprehension in English of emergent bilingual students between third and fifth grade in the United States. The results show that higher ToM ability has a moderate and significant correlation with listening and reading comprehension, word identification, and vocabulary. Furthermore, even after controlling for grade, vocabulary, and decoding, individual differences in ToM predict a small proportion of English listening and reading comprehension. As the authors point out, this exploratory study presents evidence on a minimally explored topic with emergent bilingual students of Spanish-speaking origin. The results allow us to identify the role played by different skills in the oral and written comprehension processes of a diverse students.

This paper provides evidence to design interventions that go beyond a deficit theory approach and move towards valuing of linguistic diversity. Also, this study applies a framework that makes the *Simple View of Reading* model more complex to identify predictors of reading comprehension that go beyond basic skills and language knowledge in emergent bilingual readers.

Romero-Contreras, Silvia-Macedo, and Snow explore the contribution of two linguistic factors—vocabulary and academic language skills—to learning of reading and writing in disciplinary areas. Their study extends the research on academic language and reading comprehension in Spanish with Mexican students in the late elementary and early high school to contribute to the complexity *Simple View of Reading* model. Using the construct of core academic language skills proposed by Uccelli, Phillips Galloway, Barr, Meneses and Dobbs (2015), the study verifies the predictive power of this constellation of language abilities through which meanings are constructed in school disciplinary contexts and which operate beyond words. The results show similar patterns, but different contributions for the groups of students studied. The authors highlight the malleability of academic language and thus its teachability in school contexts, which opens a new entry point for school literacy instruction. They also emphasize that the socioeconomic level of students is not a significant predictor of reading comprehension, once vocabulary and academic language skills are introduced, which contributes to the conceptualization of these linguistic variables as catalysts of equity and educational justice. This study contributes to the intermediate literacy field with data from Spanish-speaking students since research in Latin American contexts has focused mainly on initial literacy.

Meanwhile, Sánchez and García bring to the discussion on intermediate literacy by reconsidering three experimental studies in which they identify students' difficulties in achieving comprehension of academic expository texts. The authors systematize four challenges that students face when learning to read: *learning to read* (*decoding*), *learning to understand*, *reading to learn*, and *reading multiple texts to achieve a goal*. *Reading to learn* is challenging because students are confronted with academic texts with abstract themes that are developed using academic school language. Therefore, learner readers have to develop strategies to cope in a highly complex context. The authors investigate three factors to understand how they influence strategic reading: the effect of oral and written cues to help comprehension of expository texts, the distance between a cue and the idea to which it refers within a text, and, finally, remembering a reading goal in a task that involves multiple texts. The first study highlights the significant contribution of oral cues provided by teachers to scaffold reading comprehension compared with those that are only introduced in the text, although the latter is more effective than texts without any support. Insofar as the students have greater mastery of academic language—or, in the authors term it, *rhetorical competence*—they can benefit equally from either oral cues or written cues. They also point to the difficulty for fourth- and fifth-grade students to interpret written cues that are distant from the ideas they introduce. Finally, they demonstrate that in a multi-source reading context, it is difficult for fourth- and fifth-grade students to keep their reading goal active throughout the task. Hence, they propose the approach of *helping to understand* with reading academic texts, since all oral and written supports—structures to ensure access to ideas—are provided for students to achieve the comprehension of a particular text.

Sepúlveda, Paulet, and Cardoso's paper has been included in educational interventions that propose explicit teaching of language to promote disciplinary learning. The researchers refer to the extensive tradition that academic and disciplinary texts are demanding for students, as they usually have high proportions of nouns and nominal groups, in addition to technical terms, numerous abstract words, and grammatical metaphors, amongst other aspects (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2001). The study describes changes in the practices of two teachers after participating in a program that seeks to improve reading and learning from texts in History, with activities grouped into four blocks that respond to different objectives and moments of interaction with the academic texts: 1) preparing students to study the text; 2) reading and commenting on the text; 3) studying the text; and 4) communicating the comprehension of the text. The research was conducted in fourth-grade

classrooms in two schools in Brazil. The results indicate that, by incorporating of the program's proposals, the teachers provided more opportunities to attend, retrieve, comment on, and analyze the informational content of the texts. In parallel, student participation increased, particularly in the classroom of the teacher who had a more interactive teaching style from the beginning.

The study by Resina and Salas examines the relations between oral and written language in the learning context of argumentative discourse. Bilingual Catalan-Spanish first-year secondary students from a school in Barcelona were divided into two groups: one group first received an oral language intervention (based on the Word Generation program) and then a written language intervention (based on the SRSD model of Graham and Harris, 2009), while the other group received identical interventions, but applied in the reverse order. The two groups were compared with another group that received only the usual Spanish language and literature lessons. The students were assessed before beginning the interventions, at the end of the first intervention, and at the end of the second, analyzing the *intra-* and *inter-modality* effects. The results indicate that both interventions led to significant intra-modality effects: the oral language intervention improved the quality of oral argumentative discourse and academic language, while the written language intervention produced an improvement in the quality and length (measured by the number of words) of the students' written argumentative texts. However, the results also demonstrate that the students who received the oral language intervention first wrote better quality texts on the first measurement than the control group, but lower quality texts than the group that received the written language intervention first. This study reinforces the notion that research in language acquisition at the late developmental stage should address the implications of the bidirectional relations between the two modalities while noting and explaining the learning specificities of each discursive modality.

Valdivia's paper focuses on the learning achieved by young Chileans through *Instagram*. Her ethnographic study suggests that social media blur the boundaries of the institutionalized learning context and shows how young people construct meaning in digital spaces mainly through visuality. The author describes the digital practices of eight young people—five men and three women—who have different levels of digital production on social media, and she distinguishes between occasional, active, or advanced producers. By observing the routines of the young people, she concludes that the digital sphere enables crossovers between the forms of participation of the home, the school, and the peer group. The digital productions analysis displays different degrees of mastery and reflection on the semiotic and rhetorical resources used by young people in various activities. The teenagers who are most active on Instagram seek to share personal experiences in which the meanings are shaped by the relations between images, humor, and words in both English and Spanish. For their part, those with advanced digital production demonstrate aesthetic and visual knowledge mastery for photos creation, which are posted on accounts with a defined curatorial line. Of particular interest are the digital productions of young people who participate in a feminist organization, since their political activities are discursively presented on social media. To position themselves, their productions are constructed using academic language as a resource to legitimize their views and objectives to influence their school institutions. The paper highlights the liquid nature of the languages used in the productions that circulate in the digital sphere and the different purposes of the social participation of young people on a digital and multimodal platform with global reach.

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Unsworth proposes an analytical framework for the description of multimodal ensembles published in school science textbooks, as well as those created by Australian secondary school students. The author observes that considerably more research has been done on the technicality and aggregation of meaning in verbal texts, which reveals the linguistic complexity with which students are faced. However, little research has been done on these characteristics in multimodal ensembles used to build school scientific knowledge. The proposal outlined in this paper makes a significant contribution to the theoretical description of visualizations for science learning, since previous studies have focused mainly on images with simple structures. However, school textbooks instead use multiple structures that mix the narrative

and the analytical. Similarly, previous studies have only minimally explored the role of verbal language in predominantly visual ensembles. Therefore, this study proposes an updated multimodal ensembles taxonomy that explains scientific processes relevant for science learning. The proposal is also used to describe two multimodal ensembles about chemical processes produced by secondary school students in the context of a typical exam task. This study highlights the importance of visual language for learning in the disciplines and the diverse relations with verbal language in disciplinary literacy practices.

Lastly, Rosado, Mañas, Yúfera, and Aparici examined analytical texts written in Catalan by a group of bilingual Catalan-Spanish secondary school and first-year university students to identify their difficulties in establishing intra- and inter-clauses connectivity. They studied the connective markers repertoire (conjunctions, parenthetical discourse markers, lexical markers) and the discursive functions (propositional, structural, modal). The results show that the texts produced by university students are longer than those written by secondary school students, while high school students also use a significantly higher proportion of markers and a higher frequency of conjunctions. In contrast, in the texts produced by university students, the connectives they used most often are parenthetical discourse markers. The authors observe that less expert writers include conjunctions that are stripped of their original value to join propositions, which has been reported in other research, although in other genres, at earlier stages, and typically in oral discourse. The use of propositional markers is significantly higher among the secondary school group, while the opposite is true with respect to modal markers. Through the specific analysis of markers, the authors show that the university students seem to have greater engagement with their texts. Thus, competently and effectively relating the information packaged within sentences or discourse larger units seems to be learning that takes longer and goes beyond adolescence. This paper suggests the relevance of considering genres and, in detail, the analytical texts' linguistic resources in the study of late language development to promote teaching practices that empower students to make decisions about the texts they construct.

From the articles' analysis, it is interesting to observe the various ways of specifying the concept of language through an adjective: for example, *academic language*, *argumentative language*, *disciplinary language*. All these distinctions highlight the situated character of language and the sociocultural approach to address it with emphasis on the *register*, the *discursive genre*, or the *disciplinary field*. We can also identify the interchangeable use of *lengua* (in Spanish) and *language* in studies that emphasize the differences according to the *modality* (oral and written). Finally, this issue includes studies highlighting the role of different semiotic modes—going beyond the verbal—for knowledge building across different contexts; thus, they focus on studying visual language or multimodality.

Some of the studies make a distinction between *language* and *literacy*. In psychologically oriented research, the term *literacy* refers to the school learning processes of reading and writing, while *language* refers, rather, to orality. On the other hand, according to the sociocultural proposal of the *New Literacy Studies* (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), *literacy* is defined as a social practice—mediated not only by verbal language, but also by other semiotic modes—in which different actors participate and co-construct meanings in both public and private spaces. Hence the distinction between school practices, understood as those that shape meaning within schools for pedagogical purposes, and vernacular practices, defined as those that take place in local and private spaces, driven by personal objectives and without a formal teaching process. This difference, although useful and important to study and understand the language development, does not imply a dichotomy or a clear separation these languages, since their uses are usually conceptualized from the logic of a progressive spiral from practices in the home to school practices and then to professional and civic practices (Uccelli et al., 2020). As shown by some of the studies in this volume, in the oral and written use of language, hybrid and multimodal forms are the ones that prevail and deserve more attention from researchers, as well as a greater use from teaching practices.

Regarding the concept of *learning*, the studies do not operationalize it explicitly, but instead infer three dimensions to address it. First, it is argued that the oral language development serves as a precursor and continues as a coordinated and crucial evolutionary process that supports learning to read and write, particularly that which co-constructs disciplinary school practices. Hence, the interest in understanding in greater depth the linguistic and discursive resources necessary to be explicitly taught in school so that all students can access the knowledge constructed through this language and produce analytical school genres. Moreover, they are also expected to develop critical metalinguistic skills that encourage them to innovate and even transgress strict norms or prescriptions in favor of personal, authentic, and reflective expression (Uccelli et al., 2020).

The studies are built on the premise that school is a space for learning to read and write, in which the mastery of language contributes to the achievement of this objective. Following this line of reasoning, oral and written language is understood as a mediating tool for learning. Thus, a first way of understanding learning follows one of Vygostky's (1979) proposals on *mediation*, who states that language is not only a medium that allows communication, but also a cultural tool that enables the internalization of cognitive functions. Specifically, Vygostky (1979) points out that learning written language promotes the development of analytical reasoning, since learning this system of signs allows the construction of meanings detached from the immediate physical context of communication.

Secondly, there is an allusion in generic terms to the learning that students can acquire if they have command of *written*, *analytical*, *academic*, or *disciplinary* language. In other words, the studies indicate that knowledge of oral and written language facilitates students' learning of different subjects that they can access through reading and writing. Therefore, these practices have epistemic potential since they promote the learning of disciplinary content (Serrano, 2014).

Finally, the learning field is expanded beyond the school institution, and learning is specifically defined as a way of being in society, as a cultural practice. The concept of *learning lives* (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2017) is proposed to highlight the constant, multi-contextual, and open-ended nature of learning outside the school. Indeed, this concept emphasizes how people navigate spaces through which they constantly learn in their daily interactions; for example, in digital spaces one can learn how to search for content using hashtags in Spanish and English, how to produce a manga-style drawing, or how to write a vision or mission of a collective, among others.

Theoretically, these studies invite us to delve deeper into concepts that allow us to overcome the dichotomy between oral and written for school learning to understand the multiple relations among modalities, modes, registers, genres, and contexts. Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) propose the concept of linguistic literacy to refer to the knowledge that speakers have of their linguistic repertoires, partly a product of the processes of learning to read and write, to enact them consciously and flexibly within specific genres. Uccelli and colleagues (2020) introduce the concept of language for school literacy to point out the discursive practices and skills that students need to gradually learn to act flexibly in reading and writing activities in disciplinary learning contexts. These concepts highlight the dynamism between language and learning in school, but do not yet incorporate the role of other semiotic modes and other non-institutionalized learning spaces. Therefore, further theorizing is required to demonstrate the multiple relations among languages, contexts, and learning.

The studies in this thematic issue use a myriad of methodological perspectives, which reveal the complexity of this educational problem. Quantitative studies of a more psychological nature allow us to understand the contributions of socio-cognitive and linguistic variables to comprehension processes and determine the differences between students groups depending on their preferences for specific texts. The studies related to late language development also utilize quantitative methods to determine the effects of specific interventions focused on language modalities or specific resources across groups. One qualitative study characterizes teaching practices for the implementation of a program to promote the analysis of history texts. From a corpus analysis perspective, the study on multimodality focuses on the description of infographics in science textbooks. Lastly, a study with

educational and digital ethnography elements delves into the digital production practices of young people. Thus, the relations between languages and learning range from generalizing the results to the in-depth understanding of multiple associations between these two constructs.

Empirically, the studies provide evidence to enrich a pedagogically-oriented theory about learning of language and through language (Grøver et al., 2019). All the studies present results that make a significant contribution to the field of research on language development and how it is taught in school, but they also specify criteria for implementing pedagogical practices to make explicit the role of languages in the learning construction. These contributions are built based on a functional and flexible view of language use, as well as the appreciation of linguistic diversity and contexts of participation with specific proposals to support students and teachers beyond a deficit narrative.

This thematic issue of PEL was designed in Chile during a time of crisis and transformation, in the wake of a social uprising that led thousands of people to seek some way—through raised voices, banners, banging pots and pans, graffiti, or by song—to demand dignity, which has left the country in a constitutional process that is unprecedented in history. The edition was thought, written, and sought by authors from different places worldwide during a pandemic that has deeply questioned the meanings of education and research. We hope that this thematic issue —*Languages for Learning*— will contribute to the discussion on the multiple relations between language and learning, considering that the historic moment in which we find ourselves has fractured the spaces of the known and has enhanced the fluid nature of languages. New questions about social and cultural transformations based on the languages that co-construct learning will undoubtedly emerge in the post-pandemic scenario, after almost two years in which interactions involving digitally-mediated learning have increased. What is more evident now is that research on language development has to account, in some way, for the cognitive, sociocultural, and political character of languages and learnings.

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