

A Study on the Social Nature of Language in English Teaching at the Basic Education Stage: Insights from Gao Mingkai's "An Introduction to the Study of Language"

Xiujian Yuan¹, Zhuo Zhang², Qiang Zheng^{2*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Quzhou University, Quzhou 324000, Zhejiang, China

²Faculty of International Education, Sias University, Zhengzhou 451150, Henan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Based on Gao Mingkai's "An Introduction to the Study of Language," this paper explores how the social nature of language informs English teaching in basic education. Focusing on Gao's core ideas—the social conception of language, linguistic function, and the unity of language and thought—it argues that language arises from social interaction and serves human cognition. Using literature analysis and classroom observation, it identifies problems such as excessive attention to form and neglect of communicative and cognitive functions, then proposes improvements. The study shows that Gao's theory redefines English learning through authentic contexts and the interplay between language and thought, providing a basis for communicative teaching and creative thinking.

Keywords: Social nature of language; English teaching; "An Introduction to the Study of Language"; Communicative function; Thinking development

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1. Introduction

With China's educational reform, English teaching is moving from knowledge transmission to competence development, yet classrooms still overemphasize structure. Halliday (1978) ^[1] viewed language as a social semiotic system constructing meaning socially—a view close to Gao's (2011) ^[2]. Gao believed language originates in social labor and links thought with society. Unlike naturalist or individualist theories, he placed language within social history, forming a Chinese linguistic foundation.

Applying Gao's insights clarifies that language constructs meaning socially ^[3] and unites with thought ^[4]. This matches the "core competencies" framework emphasizing socialized linguistic practice ^[5], and calls for a shift from "language–knowledge–examination" to "language–thinking–society."

2. The social conception of language in “An Introduction to the Study of Language” and its pedagogical implications

Gao proposed that language is a product of social life and historical practice. This view transcends the limitations of naturalism and individualism, offering a new perspective on the social function of language.

2.1. The social origin of language and its educational function

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” emphasizes that the emergence of language is inseparable from social practice. Marx (1953)^[6] asserted that language, like value, is a collective product of society. Gao (2011)^[2] further explained that language originated from the communicative needs of collective labor, serving as both a means of coordination and a condition for social existence. The goal of language education, therefore, should extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to the cultivation of students’ social communicative competence. Halliday (1978)^[1] underscored the social significance of language, suggesting that English teaching should return to its communicative essence. Classroom instruction should be designed around contextualized interaction through tasks, collaboration, and role-playing, enabling students to learn for communication.

2.2. The social function of language and classroom communication

The essence of language lies in its social function—it serves as both a medium of thought exchange and a vehicle of cultural transmission. Labov (1972)^[7] observed that language use is closely tied to social identity. Accordingly, the classroom should be centered on authentic communication, where students engage in discussions of social topics and collaborative tasks to experience meaning in real-life contexts. As Gao (2011)^[2] stressed, language can only exist and evolve through social practice.

2.3. Pedagogical implications

The social conception of language in “An Introduction to the Study of Language” provides several insights for English teaching. First, instruction should return to its communicative foundation. Second, it should integrate the cultivation of language and thought. Third, it should promote cognitive development through culturally situated learning. As Li (2015)^[5] noted, the ultimate goal of language learning lies in socialized linguistic practice, which fully reflects the contemporary educational value of “An Introduction to the Study of Language.”

3. The social conception of language in “An Introduction to the Study of Language” and its educational implications

Building upon the Marxist conception of language, Gao emphasized that the emergence and development of language are conditioned by society, thereby providing a solid theoretical foundation for foreign language education.

3.1. The social essence of language and communicative orientation

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” asserts that language originates from social labor and human interaction, functioning as a tool of social communication^[2]. Marx (1953)^[6] regarded language as a social product, while Halliday (1978)^[1] further proposed its function in the social construction of meaning. English teaching, therefore, should focus on communicative application rather than formal drills. Through task-based and project-based activities, students can acquire language within authentic social contexts^[5].

3.2. Social function and pragmatic competence

Language serves as a bridge connecting culture and society. Labov (1972)^[7] and Hymes (1974)^[8] both emphasized the importance of pragmatic appropriateness. Teachers should highlight contextualized instruction to enhance students’

pragmatic awareness—for instance, by contrasting formal and informal expressions—to foster intercultural communicative competence.

3.3. Historicity of language and cultural orientation

Language evolves alongside social institutions and cultural transformation ^[2]. Sapir (1921) ^[9] noted that language both reflects and shapes culture. Accordingly, English teaching should strengthen its cultural orientation, cultivating students' cultural understanding and value identification through comparative studies of Chinese and Western cultures ^[10].

3.4. Linguistic normativity and classroom assessment

The meaning of linguistic symbols depends on social convention ^[2]. Classroom assessment, therefore, should emphasize students' communicative performance rather than rely solely on standardized tests. Cooperative tasks, oral presentations, and peer assessments can be adopted to better reflect the social and communicative nature of language ^[8].

3.5. Pedagogical insights

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” offers three key pedagogical insights for English teaching:

- (1) Construct authentic classrooms centered on social communication;
- (2) Integrate language learning with the cultivation of thinking;
- (3) Combine pragmatic awareness with cultural literacy.

Ultimately, language learning should serve the broader goal of socialized education ^[5].

4. The reconstructed value of “An Introduction to the Study of Language” in English teaching reform

Under the context of curriculum reform and the core competency-oriented education paradigm, English teaching in China has shifted from knowledge transmission to competency development and literacy cultivation. However, classroom practice continues to reveal problems such as “formalized language learning,” “pseudo-communication,” and “fragmented cultural instruction.” A disconnection remains between teaching content and students' social development needs. Gao Mingkai's “An Introduction to the Study of Language” (2011), as a landmark in Chinese linguistic theory, emphasizes the social nature, functionality, and historicity of language ^[2]. Its theoretical insights provide a foundation for re-evaluating the educational value of language within the ongoing reform of English teaching.

4.1. From a “Tool-oriented” to a “Society-oriented” approach: A shift in pedagogical philosophy

For a long time, English teaching at the basic education level has centered on the instrumental nature of language, prioritizing grammar, vocabulary accumulation, and test performance. This “tool-oriented” model detaches language learning from social contexts, leaving students unable to communicate effectively in authentic situations. “An Introduction to the Study of Language” fundamentally challenges this separation between language and society. Gao (2011) ^[2] argues that language is a product of social practice, serving both human communication and the exchange of ideas. This view reminds educators that the essence of language teaching lies not in mastering formal rules but in fostering social interaction and meaning-making.

Halliday's (1978) ^[1] theory that “language is a social semiotic system” resonates closely with Gao's perspective. Both stress that language instruction should be guided by social meaning and contextualized learning. In practice, this implies a pedagogical shift from a “knowledge-centered” to a “society-centered” classroom. Teachers should employ project-based learning and task-based teaching, enabling students to use English to solve real-life problems in authentic social contexts. Such a paradigm shift can enhance students' practical communicative competence and social engagement.

4.2. From “Knowledge transmission” to “Thinking cultivation”: Expanding educational objectives

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” proposes the unity of language and thought, viewing language as the externalization of thinking and thought as the intrinsic driving force behind language development ^[2]. This insight profoundly informs the reconstruction of educational objectives in English teaching. Traditional pedagogy has overemphasized grammatical accuracy and lexical memorization while neglecting students’ cognitive and expressive capacities. Chomsky (1965) ^[4] argued that language learning is essentially a process of cognitive restructuring. Without cultivating thinking skills, language education cannot truly enhance students’ overall literacy.

Therefore, English teaching at the basic education stage should move from “knowledge transmission” to “thinking cultivation.” Teachers should strengthen inquiry-based learning by fostering questioning, analysis, and reflection through discussion, debate, and comparison. Students should be guided to use English for expressing ideas, analyzing perspectives, and solving problems. For instance, reading instruction can focus on exploring the social significance and moral values of texts, while writing instruction can emphasize logical organization and argumentative clarity. As Vygotsky (1962) ^[11] noted, language mediates the development of thought, and education should leverage linguistic activity to promote cognitive internalization. This approach aligns seamlessly with the theoretical foundations of “An Introduction to the Study of Language.”

4.3. From “Closed classrooms” to “Social contexts”: Expanding the spatial dimension of learning

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” underscores the social and practical dimensions of language, asserting that its evolution depends on social communication and cultural interaction ^[2]. This perspective provides new insights into the spatial reconstruction of English teaching. Traditional classrooms are often confined to textbooks and physical settings, overlooking the role of social context in language acquisition. Labov’s (1972) ^[7] research shows that linguistic variation is closely linked to social situations and that language exposure in social settings is far more dynamic than in the classroom.

Accordingly, English education should extend the learning space from the classroom to broader social contexts. Teachers can introduce authentic social environments into lessons—such as inviting guest speakers, conducting campus surveys, or organizing community service activities—so that students experience language in real-life communication. In addition, digital tools can be leveraged to create hybrid learning environments (online + offline), allowing students to access authentic linguistic input through digital resources, inter-school collaborations, and international exchanges. As Li (2015) ^[5] observes, the true goal of language learning lies in “participating in social life through language.” Only when learning returns to real social contexts can education gain genuine practical significance.

4.4. From “Single evaluation” to “Multiple evaluation”: Reconstructing the assessment system

The social nature of language determines that linguistic competence is multidimensional. “An Introduction to the Study of Language” posits that the effectiveness of language depends on social recognition and communicative practice ^[2]. Yet, current assessment models in English education still rely predominantly on written examinations that measure static knowledge rather than dynamic communicative ability. Hymes’s (1974) ^[8] communicative competence model argues that true language ability encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic appropriateness and social adaptability.

Guided by this principle, English assessment should shift from “product-oriented” to “process-oriented,” and from “single-score” evaluation to “multi-dimensional” performance assessment. Teachers can integrate classroom observation, learning portfolios, project presentations, and peer assessment to holistically evaluate students’ language expression, collaboration, and intercultural awareness. For example, in task-based instruction, students can demonstrate their learning through English speeches, poster displays, or group reports. Teachers should then assess linguistic appropriateness, logical coherence, and social engagement. Such a multi-modal system better reflects the social-practice principle of language advocated in “An Introduction to the Study of Language” and helps cultivate authentic communicative competence.

4.5. The contemporary educational value of “An Introduction to the Study of Language”

“An Introduction to the Study of Language” is not merely a linguistic treatise but also a work of enduring educational significance. Its social conception of language provides a theoretical foundation for the localization of English teaching in the new era. First, it emphasizes that language education should serve social development, aligning with the Ministry of Education’s “core competencies” framework. English teaching thus aims not only to develop linguistic skills but also to fulfill the formative mission of education. Second, its theory of the unity of language and thought underscores the importance of fostering logical and creative thinking through language learning. Third, its discussion of the historicity and cultural embeddedness of language offers theoretical guidance for intercultural education. As Lu (2001) ^[10] notes, the deeper goal of language learning is to cultivate cultural understanding and value identification—a notion that “An Introduction to the Study of Language” systematically articulates.

With the acceleration of globalization and digitalization, foreign language education faces both challenges and opportunities. English teaching at the basic education level should be guided by the sociolinguistic perspective of “An Introduction to the Study of Language,” establishing a teaching system grounded in Chinese learners’ realities. By reinforcing the social, cognitive, and cultural functions of language, English education can not only achieve communicative goals but also promote holistic student development and foster social responsibility.

In summary, the theoretical principles of “An Introduction to the Study of Language” provide a systematic framework for reconstructing the value of English teaching reform in basic education: conceptually, it shifts from instrumentality to social orientation; pedagogically, from knowledge delivery to thinking cultivation; spatially, from closed classrooms to open contexts; and evaluatively, from outcome-based to process-based assessment. This transformation reflects the essential return of language education—from society and back to society. As Gao (2011) ^[2] aptly stated, “Language manifests its vitality only through social practice.” In this sense, “An Introduction to the Study of Language” is not only a milestone in the history of linguistics but also an enduring intellectual guide for English teaching reform in basic education.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of Gao Mingkai’s “An Introduction to the Study of Language” shows that its ideas on social language, function, and unity of thought and language hold theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it redefines language as a social phenomenon linking society, thought, and culture, giving English education a foundation suited to China’s context. Pedagogically, it transforms language from isolated knowledge into a communicative and cognitive tool through inquiry- and project-based learning that nurtures competence and responsibility. Its focus on function and culture supports both localization and internationalization of English education, promoting holistic development and modernization.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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