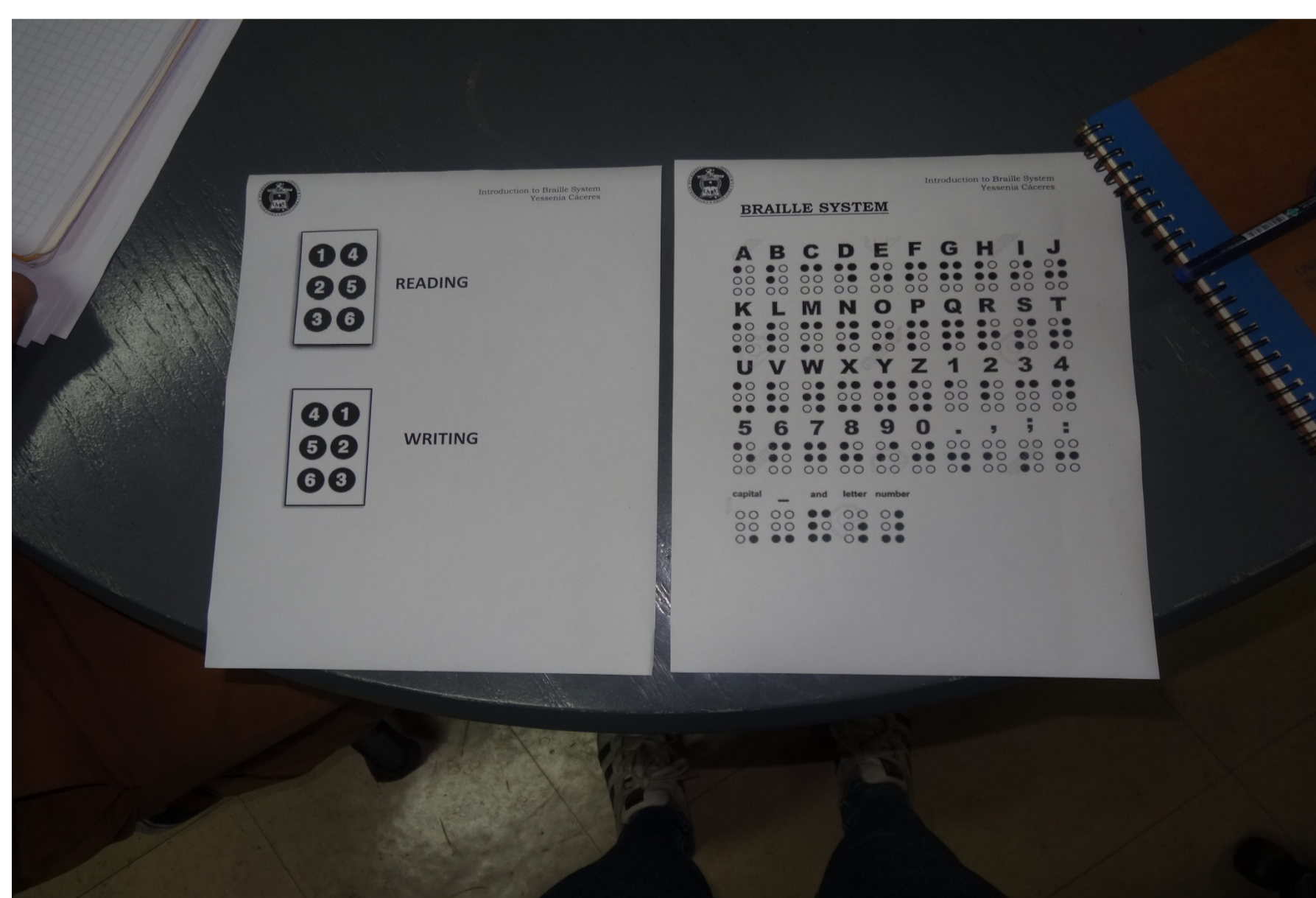


“Language acquisition as the co-construction of meaning: A semiotic investigation among Chilean English language learners”. (FONDECYT Regular 2016, N° 1160402)

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INTRODUCTION

Within a semiotic framework, this research study focuses on the ways novice English language learners manage to communicate their real-life experiences, skills, and knowledge with one another using English as the target language. By considering all communicative resources, such as linguistics particles, non-verbal behaviours, spaces, and available tools in the environment, not as particles or objects with predetermined meanings and functions, but as semiotic signs that need to be mutually recognized and interpreted for particular actions by participating interlocutors, this study attempts to understand communication in a second language from a bottom-up approach; from language-use to language-form; from social practices to communicative practices; and from performance to habits of talk. This approach is in contrast to mainstream SLA theory that perceives of language acquisition as a method of transferring words, grammatical structures, and phonology of a target language with presumed fixed forms and functions from a language teacher to language students.



METHODOLOGY

Participants for this study are selected with no inclusion/exclusion criteria from a pool of students from two public universities in Santiago, Chile (Universidad de Chile and Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación) which offer English-related programmes at the university level. There are two types of participants in this study, one group consists of nine English language learners who are experts (EXP) in a field, such as in (1) an artistic domain (playing the guitar, painting, dance, etc.), (2) a manual skill (knitting, repairing garments, cooking, etc.), or (3) a theoretical field (knowledge about particle physics, planets, solid states, etc.) who perform as teachers, and a second group of 27 English language learners who function as Novices (NOV) in the above fields. One EXP conducts a 40-minute lesson, at the time, in his or her field of expertise to a group of three NOVs in the target language. The interactions between the participants are recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a discourse analytical procedure. The data are analysed for the following discursive features: (1) Co-adaptation in communicative strategies that facilitate meaning-making among the participants (e.g., recycling of linguistic particles, structures, and styles), (2) Soft-assembly of interactional events by means of minimal communicative devices (e.g., use of short utterances and non-word tokens such as ‘ok,’ ‘ahha,’ and ‘yes’), (3) ecology of communication, such as nonverbal behaviour, spaces, tools, etc. as features related to conversational discourse, and (4) the construction of semiotic context to facilitate understanding of content (e.g., use of prior knowledge and question and response routines).



EXPECTED RESULTS

It is expected to find that (1) language learners recycle one another’s technical words in English, short grammatical forms, and logical structures more than other linguistic features, (2) resolve misunderstanding and confirm learning events through minimal linguistic particles more frequently than full utterances, (3) utilize objects, spaces, and nonverbal behaviours systematically as part of communicational discourse, and, (4), co-construct adequate context for interpretation of content materials. Building on a long Chilean tradition in the semiotic field, this original approach to the topic of Second Language Acquisition will create new theoretical framework for future SLA studies.

Additionally, an approach that puts practical skills, experiences, and knowledge in the centre of language learning creates an opportunity for an understanding of real-life requirements of communication in English in custom-made situations for different professional settings and environments.

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