ESTUDIO TEÓRICO / THEORETICAL ARTICLE[1]

Representaciones sociales en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras: una síntesis conceptual sobre la implicación del alumnado, la identidad y las prácticas de aula

Social Representations in Foreign Language Education: A Conceptual Synthesis of Learner Engagement, Identity, and Classroom Practice

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Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel de las representaciones sociales en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. Mediante una síntesis conceptual de trabajos de psicología social, didáctica de lenguas y educación intercultural, distingue las representaciones de la lengua meta, de las comunidades que la utilizan y de la propia capacidad para aprender. El modelo del núcleo central y del sistema periférico permite interpretar por qué algunas representaciones se mantienen ante experiencias que las contradicen, mientras que otras se modifican según el contexto. El análisis examina las relaciones entre las representaciones, la motivación, la inversión en el aprendizaje, la ansiedad, la participación y la construcción de la identidad. También considera cómo las expectativas docentes y los materiales curriculares configuran las oportunidades de participación. Se comparan las aportaciones y los límites de los cuestionarios, las entrevistas, la evocación jerarquizada y el análisis del discurso. A partir de esta revisión, se proponen actividades para hacer visibles los supuestos iniciales, contrastar perspectivas culturales y documentar el progreso en tareas concretas. Se plantea la necesidad de combinar la observación en el aula con la recogida de datos a lo largo del tiempo para evaluar si los cambios en la interpretación se mantienen y se manifiestan en nuevas situaciones.

Palabras clave

representaciones sociales, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, motivación, ansiedad lingüística, identidad del aprendiz, competencia intercultural

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social representations in foreign language teaching and learning. A conceptual synthesis of work in social psychology, language didactics and intercultural education distinguishes representations of the target language, of the communities that use it, and of learners' own capabilities. The central-core and peripheral-system model helps explain why some representations persist when experience challenges them while others change with context. The analysis considers how representations relate to motivation, investment, anxiety, participation and identity. It also examines how teacher expectations and curricular materials shape opportunities to participate. Questionnaires, interviews, hierarchical evocation and discourse analysis are considered in terms of the evidence each can provide. The article proposes classroom activities that make initial assumptions visible, invite learners to compare cultural perspectives and document progress in specific tasks. It identifies longitudinal classroom observation and repeated elicitation as ways to examine whether changes in interpretation persist and carry over to new situations.

Keywords

social representations, foreign language teaching, motivation, language anxiety, learner identity, intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Learners enter the foreign language classroom with expectations about what the language sounds like, where it belongs and what learning it might allow them to do. A learner who associates the language with professional mobility may approach the same classroom task differently from a learner who regards speaking it as a public test of aptitude. Such expectations emerge through family conversations, media, previous schooling and encounters with speakers. Their recurrence across members of a group makes them a social phenomenon, even though any particular learner may accept, modify or reject a prevailing view. The concept of social representation helps explain how these socially available interpretations become relevant to classroom activity.

Moscovici's (1961) study of psychoanalysis in French public life provided a framework for examining how groups select, reinterpret and use knowledge as it circulates. Language education adopted that framework to study representations of languages, speakers and cultural difference. Zarate (1993) examines how teaching constructs the foreign as an object of knowledge. Castellotti and Moore (2002) connect representations of languages to education, while Py (2004) considers how representations become available for analysis in discourse. Read together, these contributions connect what learners bring to a lesson with what teachers, materials and institutions make available for them to interpret.

Two questions guide the article. First, how are representations of languages, cultures, speakers and learners formed, organised and revised across the settings of foreign language education? Second, how can those representations help account for motivation, anxiety, classroom participation and identity without assuming a direct causal route from belief to behaviour? The pedagogical question follows from this distinction. It asks what teachers can make visible, which changes are plausible within a course, and what evidence would show whether those changes endure.

The article is a conceptual synthesis of the literature cited below. It brings together social psychology, research on language learning and intercultural language education by comparing what each tradition takes as its object and what it can explain. It does not report primary data or claim systematic

coverage of the literature. Sections 2 and 3 establish the conceptual distinctions and objects of representation. Sections 4 and 5 examine the routes through which representations may matter for learners and institutions. Sections 6 and 7 connect elicitation methods to classroom practice, and the final sections consider the limits of available evidence and directions for research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Origins and Definition of the Concept

Durkheim (1898) distinguished collective representations from representations considered at the level of the individual. This distinction made it possible to treat categories of thought as social facts rather than as the sum of independent judgements. Moscovici (1961) reworked the question by studying what happened when psychoanalysis circulated among different publics. Social groups selected and interpreted material in ways that made it intelligible in relation to their existing concerns. A language can undergo a comparable process in a school community. Participants may come to associate it with employability, difficulty or cultural refinement because particular accounts of it circulate more widely than others.

A social representation is socially elaborated knowledge used to interpret an object and orient action. It can be studied as a product, such as a recurrent pattern of beliefs, images and evaluations, or as a process through which participants select and renegotiate those meanings. Neither level can be inferred from a single statement. When a learner calls a language difficult, the analyst must establish what difficulty refers to, where that description acquired authority and whether peers use it in a comparable way. The value of the concept lies in connecting the statement to a shared history and to the practices in which it becomes consequential.

Representations can help participants explain unfamiliar experiences, situate themselves and others, orient action and justify decisions after the event (Abric, 1994). These functions can overlap. A learner who describes oral fluency as a talent may be explaining differences among peers, locating their own standing in the class and accounting for a decision to avoid a speaking task. The explanation becomes more persuasive if the same representation recurs across accounts or if classroom interaction shows how participants invoke it to interpret success and failure. Isolated comments provide leads for inquiry rather than complete descriptions of group knowledge.

The four functions are particularly useful when the same evaluative expression appears in different settings. In an interview, a claim that fluency depends on talent may help explain a learner's earlier schooling. During group work, a similar claim could allocate participation by treating some classmates as naturally suited to speaking on behalf of the group. Attention to these uses prevents the researcher from coding all occurrences as interchangeable. It also connects the analysis of a representation to the local consequences of invoking it, including whether another participant endorses the classification or offers a different explanation.

2.2. The Structure of Social Representations: Central Core and Peripheral System

Abric's (1994) structural approach distinguishes relatively stable elements that organise a representation from more adaptable peripheral elements. The central core gives the representation coherence and links it to group norms and shared experience. Peripheral elements help participants apply that general framework to particular circumstances, accommodate variation and absorb experiences that appear inconsistent with the core. A group may continue to regard pronunciation as the defining test of competence while differing over which accents count as legitimate. This example

illustrates the kind of structural hypothesis the model allows. It would take additional evidence to show that the initial belief actually has central status.

The distinction clarifies why contradictory information does not always produce lasting change. After a successful encounter abroad, a learner may recognise exceptions to the view that a language is inaccessible while preserving the broader view by treating the encounter as unusual. Alternatively, several encounters that are subsequently discussed with peers may prompt a more substantial revision. Both responses are compatible with the model. Research therefore needs to track how learners integrate an experience into their explanations and whether the changes appear in other settings. A favourable reaction immediately after a lesson establishes little about durable reorganisation.

2.3. The Appropriation of the Concept by Language Didactics

Communicative and action-oriented approaches place interaction and socially situated language use within the objectives of teaching. Once learners are expected to interpret others and act with them, their assumptions about interlocutors become relevant to the tasks they perform. Research on motivation and anxiety gave language education a parallel reason to investigate how learners interpret opportunities and threats (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Horwitz et al., 1986). Social representation offers a way to connect these concerns with the sources of shared knowledge without treating all affective responses as evidence of the same social process.

The didactic literature uses different kinds of material to study these relationships. Zarate (1993) considers how the foreign is framed in teaching. Castellotti and Moore (2002) discuss the circulation of images of languages across educational settings. Py (2004) examines the linguistic forms through which people reproduce or qualify shared accounts. These approaches motivate a distinction among the objects considered in the next section. A claim about a language's value, a judgement about its speakers and an expectation about one's performance may reinforce one another, but each requires an analysis of its own object and context.

3. Objects of Representation in Language Teaching and Learning

3.1. Representations of the Target Language

Descriptions of languages as musical, romantic, useful, harsh or difficult are evaluative categories that circulate through educational, political and media discourse (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Kharchi, 2025). Their uptake may reflect the prestige of institutions associated with a language, relations between language communities, perceived similarity to a learner's repertoire or the circumstances in which instruction is encountered. The same language can attract different labels in different settings. A form valued as a resource in a multilingual household may be given little authority in a school assessment. Analysis therefore asks who applies the label, where it circulates and how it enters decisions about learning.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish orientations associated with affiliation from orientations associated with practical aims, such as academic advancement, employment and mobility. The distinction does not warrant a simple mapping from perceived prestige to affiliation. A learner can value a language for both professional and interpersonal reasons, and the relationship between those orientations and sustained work depends partly on access to activities that make the language relevant. The social representation framework helps specify the narratives through which learners

connect such aims with particular languages and communities. It leaves the strength of those connections open to empirical study.

The object of a representation should be specified at a comparable level of detail across contexts. A language may be valued in the abstract while a particular classroom variety, pronunciation or way of writing is treated less favourably. Similarly, approval of multilingualism may coexist with low expectations for learners who already use a particular variety. Analysis at the level of the language label alone can miss these differences. Classroom discussion and research can both benefit from asking whether the evaluation concerns a named language, an identifiable form of use, a class of speakers or the learner's place in an institution.

3.2. Representations of the Target Culture and Speakers

Learners form views of the people they expect to meet and the norms they expect to encounter. These views may describe entire communities through a small set of recurrent traits, as when teaching materials make one national setting stand for a language spoken in many places. Zarate (1993) shows the importance of examining how such images are constructed. Stereotypes can supply an initial frame for interpreting unfamiliar practices, but that frame can generate systematic misunderstandings if variation within a community is erased. The analytical task is to distinguish the practical use of categories from claims that the categories accurately describe all speakers.

The intercultural literature places the interpretation of cultural difference within the aims of language learning (Byram, 1997; Zarate, 1993). This entails asking how a generalisation was produced and whose standpoint it represents. A classroom can compare two texts about the same event written for different audiences, for example. Learners can identify what each account treats as ordinary, locate disagreements and consider which experiences neither account includes. This type of analysis creates room for initial assumptions to be revised without presenting a new account as a complete description of a community.

One practical aim is to make representations available for discussion while reducing the cost of expressing uncertainty. Learners might first record an interpretation individually and then compare it with alternative readings in a small group. They can distinguish what the evidence in a text supports from what they supplied through prior knowledge. Following the discussion, they can restate the interpretation in more specific terms. These steps make changes in the reasoning visible and provide a record of disagreement, which is often more informative than an exercise that ends with a shared answer.

Decentring also involves examining the assumptions learners bring from familiar settings. A classroom judgement about politeness, for instance, may depend on expectations about age, formality and the relationship between speakers. Recognising those expectations as situated enables learners to compare what counts as an appropriate interpretation under different conditions. In this sense, intercultural competence includes the capacity to revise an interpretation in light of evidence and interlocutors' accounts (Byram, 1997). It extends beyond recall of factual information about a nation or its institutions.

3.3. Representations of Oneself as a Learner

Representations of the self as a learner are related to, but broader than, beliefs about efficacy in specific tasks. Bandura's (1997) construct directs attention to whether an individual expects to perform a particular action successfully. Social representations help explain why a learner gives some performances greater weight than others when forming a general account of their aptitude. A learner may readily complete a written task while declining to speak without rehearsal. That pattern invites

separate questions about the demands of the tasks, the feedback the learner has received and the social meaning attributed to public speaking.

A recurring account of oneself as poor at languages can organise how a learner interprets setbacks. Earlier marks, experiences of correction and comparisons with peers may all contribute to that account. If avoidance reduces opportunities for speaking practice, subsequent difficulty may appear to validate the initial belief. This feedback interpretation is plausible, but it requires observations over time. Confidence, access to practice and performance may change together, and classroom arrangements may affect all three. Task-specific feedback makes it possible to identify changes in learners' expectations without construing any single outcome as a measure of general aptitude.

4. Effects of Representations on Learning Processes

4.1. Motivation and Investment in Learning

Gardner and Lambert's (1972) work established the importance of attitudes and motivational orientations in research on language learning. Representations can help explain the meanings learners attribute to particular opportunities, while the concept of investment draws attention to the social terms on which those opportunities are offered (Peirce, 1995). A highly motivated learner may decline to contribute when legitimate participation appears reserved for classmates with a particular accent or educational background. Conversely, the opportunity to use a language in a valued activity may alter both the learner's interpretation of the language and the effort they can sustain. The relationship is best understood as conditional and potentially reciprocal.

Separating motivation, investment and opportunity also changes how persistence is interpreted. A learner may report continued interest while regular attendance becomes difficult because of work, family obligations or access to instruction. Another learner may complete assignments while finding few occasions to use the language outside assessment. In both cases, the observed behaviour reflects circumstances as well as evaluation of the language. An account that includes those circumstances can ask when a representation becomes consequential and what enables learners to act on their intentions. It can also identify changes in opportunity that an attitudinal measure alone might overlook.

4.2. Language anxiety and oral participation

Foreign language classroom anxiety encompasses apprehension about communication and evaluation in settings where language performance is visible (Horwitz et al., 1986). Representations of a language as unusually difficult or of the class as unforgiving can make an oral task appear more threatening. The relationship can also operate in the other direction: an uncomfortable exchange can become part of a learner's account of why speaking is risky. Class participation is an imperfect indicator of this process because silence can also reflect activity design, turn-taking opportunities, proficiency or a preference for preparation. Combinations of task-specific reports, observations and repeated measures are better suited to examining the proposed feedback.

4.3. Learning strategies and responses to error

Representations of what counts as learning can influence the strategies learners regard as legitimate. Those who understand the task primarily as mastery of formal rules may favour rehearsal and memorisation. Those who understand it as interaction may devote more time to seeking communicative opportunities. These strategies can serve complementary purposes. Comparing them

requires attention to the goals of the activity, the resources available and the criteria used in assessment. A curriculum that rewards grammatical precision in written tests may make memorisation a reasonable choice even for learners who value interaction.

Responses to error reveal a related distinction. Under public, high-stakes correction, avoiding an unfamiliar form may be a reasonable response to the classroom conditions. Where a teacher allows revision and clarifies what the error reveals about a particular attempt, learners may be more willing to test alternatives. Discourse analysis can examine how teachers and learners assign meanings to these events (Py, 2004). An explanation based on representations should therefore connect the learner's interpretation of error to the observable correction practices that make that interpretation plausible.

4.4. Identity Construction and the Relationship to Otherness

Language learning can change how participants are positioned by others and how they understand their own affiliations. Repertoires can include several varieties and styles with different histories of use, so identity is better treated as an evolving set of positions than as a transfer from one fixed identity to another. Byram's (1997) intercultural perspective and Peirce's (1995) account of investment help connect these positions to the conditions of participation. The same learner may use the language confidently in one setting and experience limited recognition in another.

A new language may be understood as an additional resource for belonging, or it may become associated with an expectation that an existing language or identity should recede. The latter interpretation can be especially consequential in migration and second-language schooling, where institutional recognition and access are at stake (Castellotti & Moore, 2002). Research should examine how those expectations are expressed in policies and interactions, and how learners respond to them. This avoids attributing withdrawal solely to a learner's reluctance and makes room for accounts of how opportunities to participate differ across settings.

5. The Role of Teacher and Institutional Representations

5.1. Teacher Representations

Teachers' representations are visible in decisions about what is taught and whose use of a language serves as a model. Choices about accents, the distribution of speaking time, the treatment of variation and the form of corrective feedback can all communicate assumptions about competence and legitimacy (Zarate, 1993). Such decisions may also be shaped by curriculum constraints or examination demands. A claim about an individual teacher's representation therefore gains credibility when interview accounts, material choices and interactions are considered together. The comparison allows the analyst to see where a teacher's stated goals and available practices converge or diverge.

A teacher who presents cultural examples as representative of a single national community may inadvertently obscure variation across regions, generations or social groups. A teacher who includes several situated accounts can help learners examine differences without assuming that all perspectives are interchangeable (Byram, 1997). Expectations about learners may likewise influence who receives demanding questions, how long a teacher waits for an answer and whether a weak performance is interpreted as temporary. These are mechanisms through which expectations could matter. Demonstrating their effects requires evidence about the opportunities learners receive and how their participation changes.

5.2. Institutional Representations and Language Policies

Curricula, examinations and textbooks frame languages in relation to educational priorities. A syllabus may emphasise employment, intercultural interpretation or participation in public life, and its choices affect which forms of competence become visible. Textbook analysis can examine who speaks, where interactions take place, which varieties are used and what kinds of cultural knowledge are taken for granted (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Zarate, 1993). The resulting description identifies the representations made available through materials. Classroom observations are needed to show whether teachers and learners reproduce, negotiate or contest them.

Institutional documents can also be compared across levels. A policy may name intercultural learning as an objective, while examinations give most of their weight to responses with a single expected interpretation. Teachers working under those conditions may give less time to open-ended cultural analysis than the policy would suggest. This example illustrates why policy texts, assessment instruments and classroom practices should be treated as related evidence. It also directs attention to the institutional conditions under which teachers can act on their own pedagogical judgements about linguistic and cultural variation.

6. Methodologies for Eliciting Social Representations in Language Didactics

An elicitation method generates evidence of a particular kind. Survey categories can support comparisons across learner groups, while interviews can show how an interpretation is qualified in discussion. Observations can reveal how a representation is invoked during interaction, and document analysis can identify the representations circulated institutionally. The research question determines which evidence is most relevant. A study of shared associations around a language name requires a different design from a study of how learners respond to corrective feedback. The two designs can be combined when their assumptions and units of analysis are clear.

Questionnaires can collect comparable responses across participants or at several points during a course. The design should distinguish named constructs, such as perceived usefulness and fear of speaking, and examine whether respondents interpret prompts similarly. Semi-structured interviews can then probe the reasons, qualifications and contradictions behind responses. Py's (2004) discursive approach is particularly relevant here because the interview is an interaction in which participants construct an account with an audience in mind. Interview data offer evidence about how representations are articulated, including what speakers present as shared or dispute as questionable.

In hierarchical evocation, participants produce associations with a prompt and rank their relative importance. Analysts may combine frequency and rank to identify candidate elements for further investigation (Abric, 1994). Salience in this task is insufficient by itself to establish that an element belongs to the central core. Drawings and collages can broaden participation, especially among younger learners, but the researcher should consider participants' explanations alongside visual categories. Without those explanations it is easy to assign a meaning to an image that reflects the analyst's assumptions rather than the participant's interpretation.

Analysis of discourse can track evaluative vocabulary, modality, comparison and metaphor in interviews, texts or classroom exchanges (Py, 2004). It can also attend to what happens after a representation is voiced. An agreement, a challenge or a shift in topic can show how participants treat a claim in the moment. Triangulation compares such evidence with surveys, teaching materials or observations across time. Divergence between sources may indicate that the representation is

audience-specific, that participants understand the prompts differently or that stated beliefs and classroom practices are conditioned by different constraints.

A longitudinal design could collect open responses at the beginning and end of a teaching sequence and use a later session to assess transfer. Prompts should target similar constructs while limiting the extent to which learners can reproduce the wording of the original lesson. Interviews can examine whether a changed response reflects a new explanation, greater familiarity with the task or sensitivity to what the researcher expects. Where observations are available, analysts can compare self-reported change with the evidence learners cite during interaction. Reporting contrasting cases would help readers assess whether the observed pattern applies across participants or depends on particular experiences.

7. Didactic and Pedagogical Implications

7.1. Making Representations Visible

Making representations available for examination can begin with ordinary classroom work. At the start of a unit, a teacher could ask learners what they expect to hear in a particular speech setting, how confident they are in interpreting it and what informed those expectations. The teacher can distinguish assumptions about the language from assumptions about speakers or the task. Such distinctions create a baseline for reflection. They can also show which questions are shared by a group and which concern an individual learner's previous experiences.

Collective discussion can then connect those initial responses to specific evidence. A teacher could invite learners to compare short interactions in which speakers use different styles to perform a similar action. Each learner can return to their original interpretation and identify what the comparison confirmed or complicated. The activity should allow students to retain uncertainty or disagree over interpretations. Its educational value lies partly in clarifying why different readers reached different conclusions, rather than in producing a single summary of what a community is like.

Teachers can revisit initial accounts after later tasks to examine whether learners qualify a generalisation or use a new distinction independently. A change in the words learners use may indicate uptake of course terminology, while a change in the evidence they bring to an interpretation may show a different kind of development. The two should be evaluated separately. For research purposes, evidence of change is stronger when new reasoning recurs across independent activities or persists after the original teaching sequence has ended.

7.2. Examining and revising stereotypes

Stereotypes may be difficult to revise when they make several experiences intelligible at once or support a valued group identity (Abric, 1994). A direct counterexample may then be treated as a special case. An alternative classroom approach is to compare accounts from people in different roles and positions, trace how those accounts were produced and consider which speakers are absent. The aim is to identify the scope of an interpretation and develop criteria for revising it. This approach also gives teachers discretion to address derogatory claims while examining the assumptions on which they depend.

An intercultural task can ask learners to explain how another speaker might interpret an encounter, then consider what information would help them judge among competing interpretations (Byram,

1997). The task connects linguistic evidence with participants' expectations and creates a place for learners to examine their own frames of reference. A later activity can present a different situation and assess whether learners spontaneously attend to context and perspective. Such transfer is a more demanding outcome than agreement with a teacher's explanation in the original lesson.

7.3. Acting on Representations of Oneself as a Learner

Self-assessment and feedback can give learners more specific grounds for judging what they can do. A task may begin with rehearsal, proceed to interaction and end with reflection on what improved between attempts. Learners can compare their predictions with evidence from their performance and identify an accessible next task. This use of differentiated support follows Bandura's (1997) emphasis on beliefs about specific capabilities. It also makes progress observable without defining competence through comparison with other learners. Whether the changes persist would require follow-up under tasks that vary in difficulty and social demands.

The design of corrective feedback also matters for this purpose. A comment can identify what a learner accomplished, specify one point that is still causing difficulty and offer an opportunity to try the revised form. Several attempts then provide concrete evidence of progress and help distinguish uncertainty about a construction from a judgement about general ability. A teacher could use a short record of the learner's predictions and revisions to guide the next task. The resulting evidence is task-specific and can be gathered without requiring learners to publicly disclose their explanations for earlier difficulties.

7.4. Training Teachers in Representational Reflexivity

Teacher education can make representational reflexivity concrete by asking teachers to compare their intended aims with the perspectives available in a lesson. A recording or transcript may reveal whose language is treated as a model, which responses receive follow-up questions and whether examples are discussed as local practices or general rules. A teacher can combine that evidence with accounts of why particular materials were chosen. Such analysis helps connect professional expectations to the constraints and possibilities of classroom work (Zarate, 1993).

Materials can likewise be audited using explicit questions about speakers, varieties, settings and opportunities for interpretation. A unit might be revised to include accounts that address the same topic from different social positions or to specify the context of a language model previously presented as universal. The revised teaching sequence could then be evaluated through students' interpretations and through observations of classroom discussion. This approach links analysis of representations to a concrete instructional decision and provides a way to assess the decision without assuming that diverse materials necessarily change learners' views.

8. Discussion and Limitations

Social representation overlaps with terms such as attitude, belief, stereotype and linguistic imaginary. To use it precisely, a study should identify the object being represented, specify the social groups and settings in which the representation circulates, and document the practices to which it is related (Py, 2004). Shared associations should not be inferred from a single response. Likewise, a participation pattern can have several causes, including task design and institutional assessment. Triangulation is necessary because the different sources used to study representations are themselves shaped by the circumstances in which they were produced.

This article synthesises selected literature and proposes pedagogical applications. Its illustrations describe feasible activities and possible mechanisms rather than outcomes measured in classrooms. An intervention study would need to establish what changed, when it changed and whether the change lasted. Learners' willingness to reconsider an example during a discussion, their later performance in an unfamiliar task and their own reported expectations are distinct outcomes. Longitudinal and classroom-based designs could help clarify their relationships. They would also provide a basis for asking whether an intervention works similarly across different cohorts, curricula and language pairings.

Future studies should also specify what is meant by change. A shift in the frequency of an association, a change in how speakers justify it and a redistribution of participation are different outcomes. An intervention may affect one while leaving the others open. Researchers can make the relationship testable by selecting outcomes before data collection, documenting learners' initial accounts and collecting comparable evidence after an interval. Observations of teachers and analysis of the materials used during that interval would help establish which experiences participants can plausibly draw on when revising their interpretations.

9. Conclusion

The study of social representations connects foreign language learning to the histories, relationships and institutional arrangements through which participants attach meaning to languages. The central-core and peripheral-system distinction offers a way to examine why some representations are readily qualified while others retain their organising role. The distinction among representations of language, speakers and learner capability clarifies the different paths through which such knowledge may relate to motivation, anxiety and participation.

Teachers and institutions are part of those processes through the practices and materials that define legitimate participation. The pedagogical implications are concrete: examine initial assumptions, document variation within language communities, invite learners to justify interpretations and provide feedback that makes specific progress visible. The educational value of these activities concerns learners' capacity to examine evidence and revise their accounts across settings. That development requires more than agreement with culturally inclusive statements during a lesson.

Future research should connect elicited representations to classroom practices and trace how both change. Repeated elicitation, observation and analysis of materials can show how participants deploy the same representation in different settings and whether an observed change survives beyond a particular activity. Comparative designs may also help assess the influence of language status and educational context. Together, these lines of enquiry would clarify which aspects of foreign language learning the framework explains and which require evidence about other features of teaching and participation.

Research ethics and data availability

This conceptual article draws on published sources. No participants were recruited, and no primary data were collected.

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