VICTESOL · KEYNOTE

How learning happens

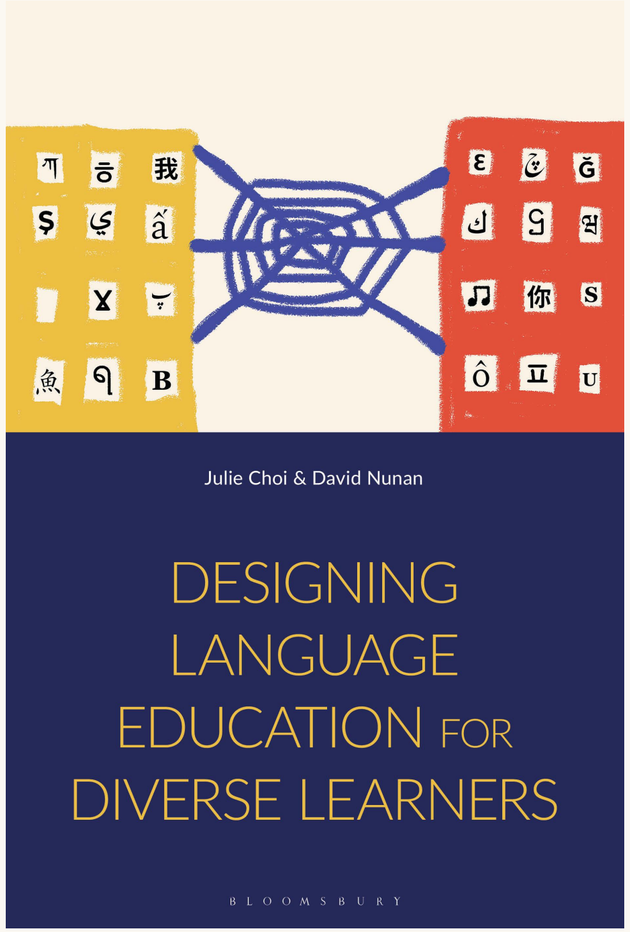
From classroom to theory [and back to the classroom]

David Nunan, Ph.D.

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Distinguished Research Professor, Anaheim University

THE BOOK

Not one model, but the right conditions



1 **Decades of research, together**
With diverse learners, focused on language, culture and identity.

2 **Evidence, but not the kind that counts**
Authorities rarely value it. So what does “evidence-based” mean?

3 **Teachers already know**
You see the struggle every day, but the structures don’t support meaningful learning.

ACROSS EVERY CONTEXT WE STUDIED

What were the conditions that allowed meaningful learning to take place?

OVERVIEW

The three-pillar framework

PILLAR 1

Affect–cognition integration

Thinking and feeling are inseparable



PILLAR 2

What the learner brings

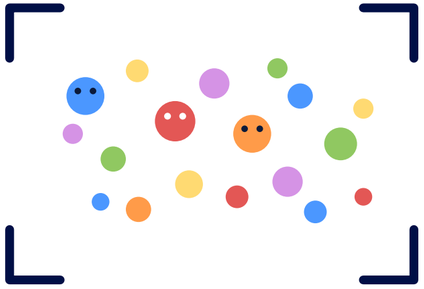
Identity, lived experience & funds of knowledge



PILLAR 3

Conditions for capability

Timeframes, multimodal affordances,meaningful purposes, dialogic spaces



PILLAR 1 · AFFECT–COGNITION

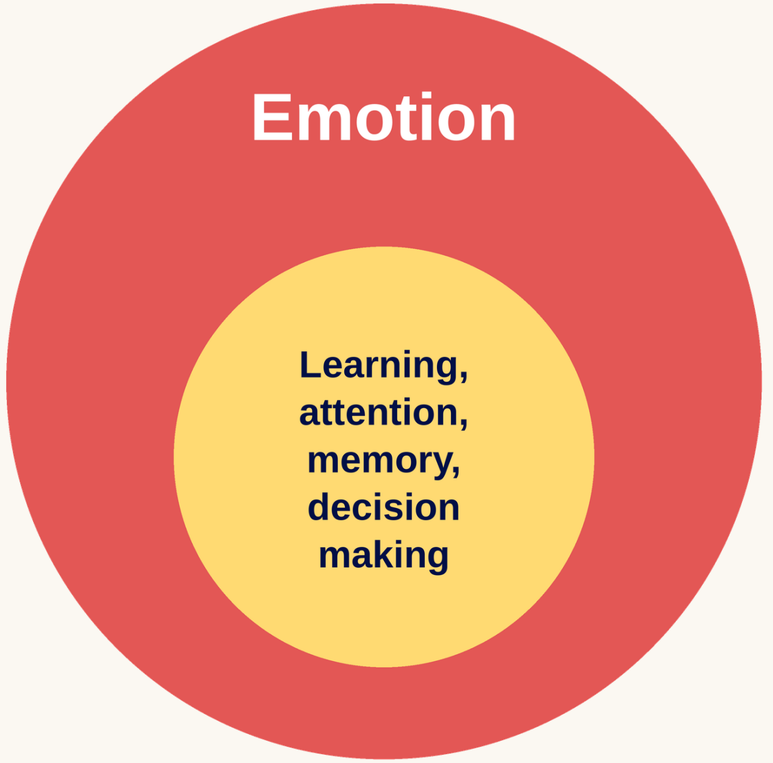
Thinking is driven by motives, interests and feelings. Separate them and you lose what makes thinking happen.

After Vygotsky (1934/1987)

PILLAR 1 · AFFECT–COGNITION

“We feel, therefore we learn.” Emotion is not an adjunct to cognition; it is a condition for meaningful learning.

Immordino-Yang (2016)



EMOTION AND THINKING WORK AS ONE SYSTEM

PILLAR 2

What the learner brings

The ‘funds’ framework

- Funds of knowledge
- Funds of aspiration
- Funds of identity
- Dark funds of knowledge

funds feed schemas

schemas feed funds

Schematic knowledge structures

The mental “scripts” we build from experience to predict and make sense of the world

SCHEMA & FUNDS

Differences

	Funds	Schemas
WHAT THEY ARE	Resources from home and community	Mental structures for predicting and making sense of the world
WHERE THEY SIT	Within families and communities	In the individual
SHARED?	Partly shared, shaped by class, race, language and experience	Never identical, even between twins

PILLAR 2

Implications

1. Regardless of identical teacher input, no two learners encounter exactly the same lesson (Allwright, 1984)

2. Existing schemas actively structure and interpret new content and experience

3. Effective teachers elicit, interpret and respond to learners' constructions of meaning

4. Learners don't simply memorise and regurgitate input — they draw on schematic knowledge (Nuthall, 2007, *The Hidden Lives of Learners*)

PILLAR 3

Creating conditions for capability

1 **Extended timeframes**

2 **Multimodal affordances**

3 **Personally meaningful purposes**

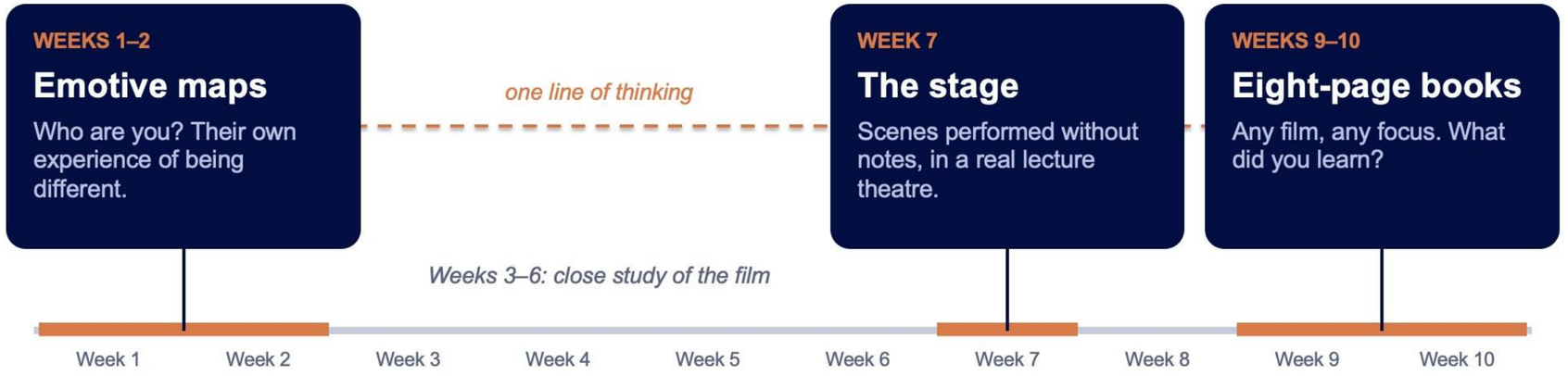
4 **Dialogic spaces**

CONDITION 1

Extended timeframes

Long-duration engagement that allows experimentation, reflection and refinement. It cannot be compressed, because identity change, not just knowledge, is at stake.

FOR EXAMPLE · YEAR 10 EAL FILM UNIT (KAILIN LIU)



Ten weeks, three designed moments

Each one feeds the next. The curriculum stays in place.

CONDITION 2

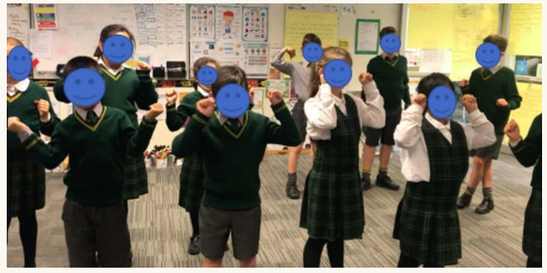
Multimodal affordances

Multiple entry points for expression when words alone fall short.

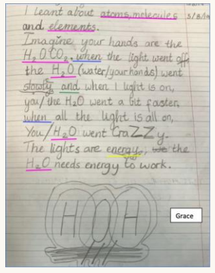
FOR EXAMPLE

Drama in science (Year 3/4)

Students mime water molecules, then draw and write what their bodies showed (Cleeve Gerkens, 2024).



BODY



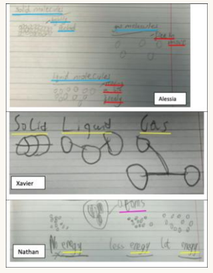
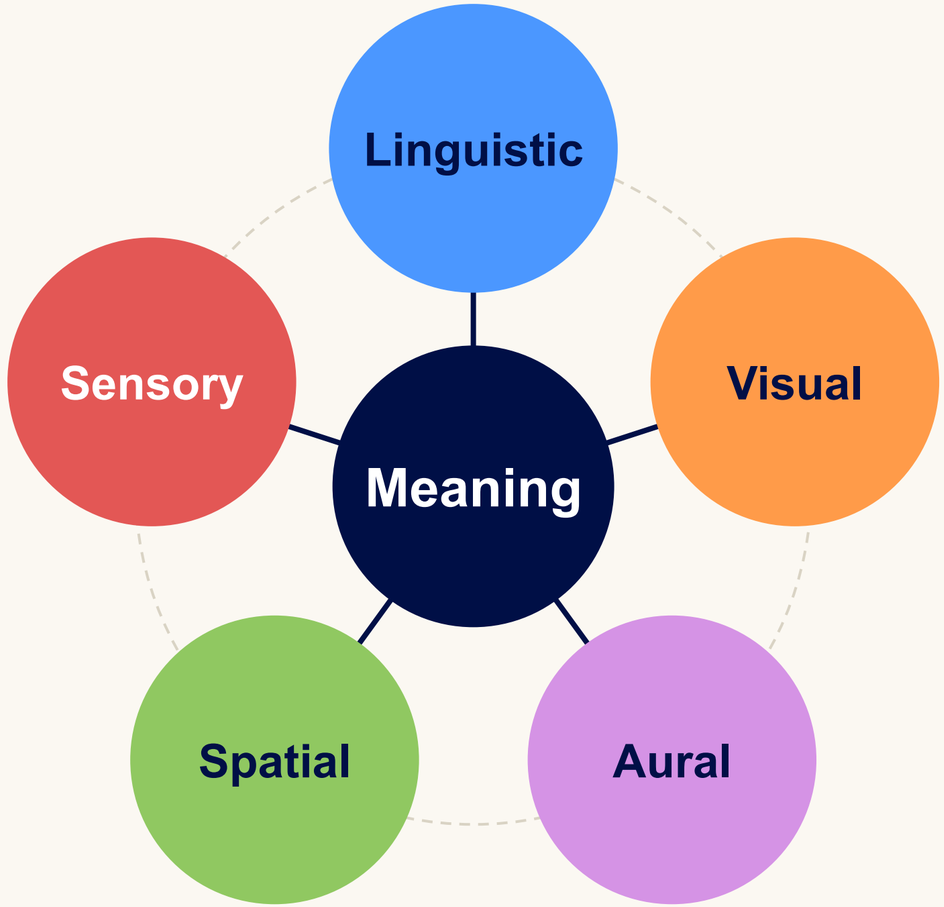


DIAGRAM WRITING



CONDITION 3

Personally meaningful purposes

Learner-defined reasons for using language, connected to identity, heritage and lived experience.

FOR EXAMPLE · HOMESICK, DANIELA NOY ARIAS



1 · THE ASSIGNMENT

A translingual picture book for a Master's subject



2 · THE REFLECTION

She writes about her process for the ARTP Lab blog



3 · THE AWARD

Her film Homesick wins Best Documentary (GSA, 2026)



4 · THE PUBLIC

Her work is exhibited in St Kilda

CONDITION 4

Dialogic spaces

Spaces for multiple forms of conversation that turn intuitive practice into conscious strategies.

FOR EXAMPLE · MILLSTREAM SCHOOL, YOUNG WOMEN OF REFUGEE BACKGROUND

Khek: one-on-one conferences

Each week a pre-service teacher sat with her and worked through her own writing.

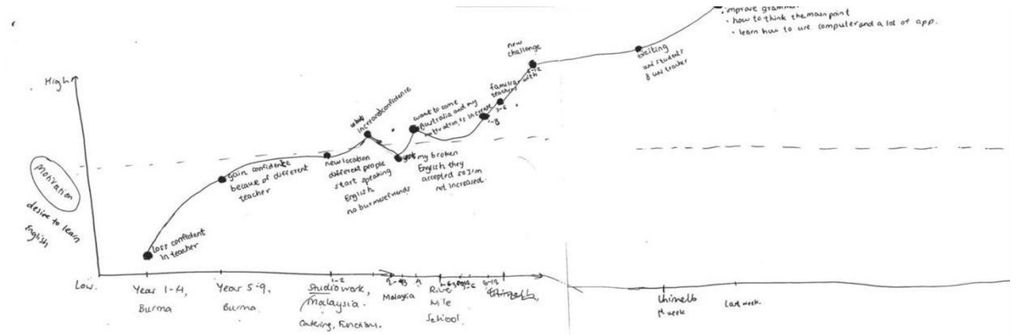
BEFORE

“I only write and finish and give teacher.”

AFTER EIGHT WEEKS

“I know that how to think, how to think about which one is wrong.”

→ *‘Private speech’ (The inseparability of cognition and emotion in second language learning, Swain, 2013)*



HER LANGUAGE TRAJECTORY GRID

At its highest point she wrote: “improve grammar”, “how to think the main point”.

SUMMARY

Learning happens when the conditions…

1. … allow learners sufficient time and space to display their capabilities
2. … provide multimodal affordances that match diverse ways of making meaning
3. … enable learners to connect new knowledge with lived experiences that matter to them
4. … create dialogic spaces for learners to collaboratively reflect on, construct and contribute their own unique knowledge

CODA

The Transformative Impact on Teaching

FROM

Teaching is the delivery of content

TO

Teaching is the design of experiences through which learners construct and reconstruct knowledge

Public and private institutions involved in Education believe that our role is only teaching English. As TESOL professionals we have to make them understand through our leadership and professionalism that we go beyond the traditional “repeat after me teaching”, [to] be agents of change in the classrooms, in the communities and in our countries.

Franklin Tellez
President, Venezuela TESOL

Thank you

David Nunan, Ph.D.

Questions & discussion

