

# Meaning Making and English Language Teaching

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## Abstract

*Meaning making is a significant, equation-changing factor in the learning-teaching experience, especially in the context of Classroom learning-teaching, and specifically in relation to English Language Teaching/ Learning in India. Looking at the classroom interaction from the perspective of meaning making can usher in a substantial change in the learning experience of learners, but more importantly, in the approach of a teacher/ trainer. Cutting across multiple disciplines such as Philosophy, Psychology, Teacher Education, Educational and Developmental Psychology, meaning making is a concept that can put learning into its rightful perspective in a learning-teaching situation, leading to meaningful learning which should be the ultimate aim of any learning situation. In an era where Pluriliteracies is projected to be the new norm, this is a factor that should be given due consideration while planning a language learning transaction. This paper is an attempt to look at some of the definitions of meaning making as identified by major scholars and researchers such as Ausubel, Park and others, and also to look into some of the ways in which it can be incorporated into the ELT scenario in the multilingual and multicultural fabric of a country like India.*

**Keywords—** ELT, Meaning making, Pluriliteracies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language Teaching and Learning is probably as old as any civilization. Different schools of thoughts and methodologies have evolved and survived across time and cultures. English Language Teaching (ELT) is a widely discussed and diversely researched area within Language Teaching. As is common knowledge, English enjoys a special status in the multicultural, multilingual and the resultant historically multistranded India, being neither a Second Language nor a Foreign Language, being more than a Foreign Language, more than a Second Language, and not yet a First Language per se, though there are multitudes of Indians who are now more competent in using English than their mother tongues.

## II. MEANING MAKING

Meaning making is an extensively studied and discussed topic, which is inter-disciplinary in nature, but considered by many to be more or less native to the domain of Psychology. It is also regarded as pertinent

in Education, Literary Studies, and Communication, and there are several models of meaning making that are available in various disciplines. Gelepithis is of opinion that the theories of meaning can be broadly classified into “four categories: philosophical, linguistic, formal and biological” (Gelepithis 1988), and these include the theories put forth by Plato, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and so on. Plato believed that meaning is not “something we find” but “something we create through conscious choice and dedicated practice” (thmeaningmovement.com), and Nietzsche thought that meaning making is more individualistic, wherein people create their own meaning depending on the choices that they make (thmeaningmovement.com).

Along with Philosophy, Psychology also looks at the meaning making process in Life, in general, and how situational meaning making and individual meaning making happens, and are all interconnected. Several theories and models of meaning making exist in the domain of Psychology, and Park’s model is a widely discussed model (Fig. 1).

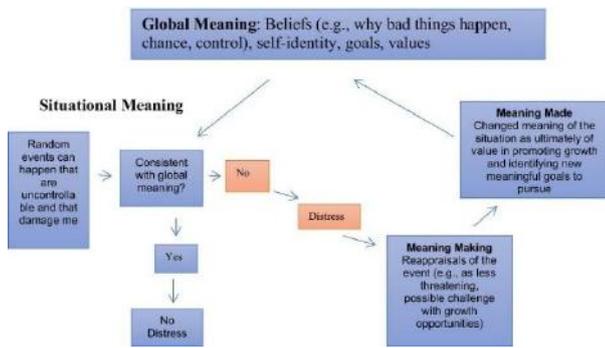


Fig. 1: Park's Model of Meaning Making

(<https://psychologyfanatic.com/parks-meaning-making-model/>)

Park explains that “[t]his model distinguishes two levels of meaning: global (people’s fundamental and overarching beliefs and their hierarchies of goals and values; . . . and situational (how global meaning, in conjunction with a given particular context, influences assigning meaning and responding to a particular situation” (Park 2022). Park says that when people experience something that is in dissonance with global meaning, they can become distressed, and then attempt to align it with the existing or perceived global meaning using various strategies. Both situational and global meanings are subject to changes. “Successful meaning making reduces discrepancies between global meaning and individuals’ assigned meaning of the specific experience and restores harmony within their global meaning vis-à-vis their current experience” (Park 2022).



Fig. 2: Seven Types of Meaning proposed by Leech

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO2ExWKIE6o>)

Most scholars working in Language Studies will be familiar with the different categorizations of meaning, such as by Palmer and by Lyons. However, the most popular one seems to be the seven types of meaning proposed by Geoffrey N Leech – conceptual, connotative, collocative, reflective, affective, social, and

thematic (Ngezahavo 2023). Fig. 2 shows the 7 categories proposed by Leech.

In Linguistics, the study of meaning or Semantics, is a very important branch, and a popular area of research too. How people encode meanings into verbal and non-verbal communication cues and how these encoded messages are decoded, the factors that affect this encoding and decoding, and the resultant meanings that are made by the receiver, are all topics of interest to researchers.

## 2.1 Meaning-Making and Teaching-Learning Process

Michael Ignelzi, in his “Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process” highlights three major reasons as to why meaning making should be given more importance and consideration in the teaching-learning process.

- i. Humans actively construct their own reality
- ii. Meaning-making develops over time and experience
- iii. The process of learning and teaching is strongly influenced by the ways participants make meaning (Ignelzi 2003)

In explicating the role of meaning-making in the process of learning and teaching, Ignelzi leans heavily on the meaning making theory of Robert Kegan. Ignelzi describes how developmental theorists such as Piaget, Kohlberg, Baxter Magolda and Kegan contend “that individuals actively construct their own sense of reality. An event does not have a particular solitary meaning attached that simply gets transferred to the individual. Instead, meaning is created between the event and the individual’s reaction to it” (Ignelzi 2003). Kegan also suggests that this meaning making process is susceptible to change over time and across life span, and that “how one understands knowledge or experience is directly related to how one understands others and the self” (Kegan, cited in Ignelzi 2003).

Another concept of Kegan that is interesting in meaning making is his categorization of Orders of Consciousness. “As a person’s development proceeds between and through these orders, meaning-making undergoes changes that affect the person’s view of the self, relations to others, and understanding of experience” (Ignelzi 2003). Fig. 3 gives the different stages of Orders of Consciousness as proposed by Kegan. Of these, it is the Third Order people who is usually involved in academic learning situations. They are “meaning-makers [who] co-construct their sense of meaning with other persons and sources (books, ideas)

in their environment” (Ignelzi 2003). An Order 4 individual transcends the Third Order, and moves into the initial stages of what Kegan prefers to call as “Self-Authorship” (Kegan, cited in Ignelzi 2003), and for this person, “meaning-making is influenced by but not determined by external sources” (Ignelzi 2003).

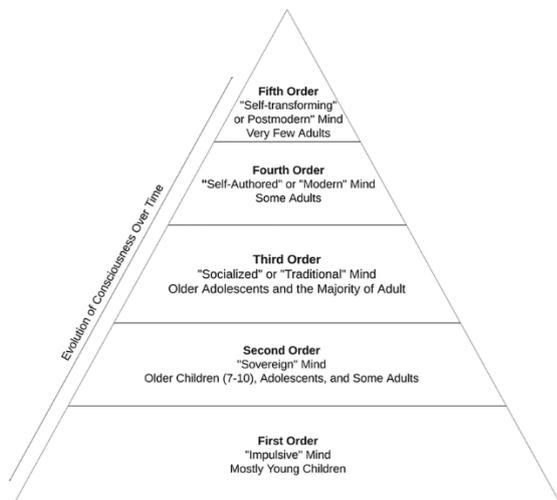


Fig. 3: Kegan's (1994) Five Orders of Evolution of Consciousness

([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Kegans-1994-five-orders-of-evolution-of-consciousness\\_fig4\\_364381700](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Kegans-1994-five-orders-of-evolution-of-consciousness_fig4_364381700))

From self-authorship, the individual can move up to the next Order, where “Self-Transformation” can happen, and this is the Order of Meaning making that the learning-teaching processes and situations should aim at creating.

It is important to note that meaning-making level is not the same as intellectual potential or ability. Meaning-making level is a developmental measure of how individuals organize their experience, which evolves over time. Students at order 3 are not less intellectually capable than students at order 4. Learning difficulties experienced by order 3 meaning-makers in order 4 environments are not due to learning deficits; they are due to being at a different point in their meaning-making evolution than the environment demands. (Ignelzi 2003)

## 2.2 Meaning Making in Language Learning and Teaching

Taking the meaning making process into consideration in teaching-learning situations and processes can bring about remarkable changes in the resultant learning, especially in language learning situations. When teachers give space to the meaning-making process

and meaning-making faculty of students, particularly in second language and foreign language learning scenarios, it will be a positive affective factor in language acquisition. “To assess individual meaning-making, faculty must listen carefully to what students say about their understanding of their experiences, including how they make sense of learning experiences, their relationships with others, and themselves” (Ignelzi 2003).

As Katie Bienkowski points out, if meaning-making is pushed to the centre of a language classroom, the educational landscape can become very dynamic, and enable the learners “to be meaning-makers rather than meaning-receivers” (Bienkowski 2024). Bienkowski was specifically discussing meaning-making in a Reading class, but when she observes that “a meaning-making classroom driven by authentic, collaborative dialogue requires prioritizing content and reconsidering what counts as comprehension” because ultimately “[c]omprehension is about meaning-making, not memorization of facts or transmission of information” (Bienkowski 2024). This concept of the relationship between comprehension and meaning-making is well-applicable to the language learning and teaching situation, because ultimately all learning is about comprehension and meaning-making.

## 2.3 Meaning Making and ELT

In ELT, numerous theories and schools of thoughts have placed the teacher to the margins of a classroom, as a facilitator, when classrooms were notionally transformed into learner-centric classrooms, thereby facilitating active learner participation. Thus, a recommendation of including meaning-making as a priority concern for an ESL or EFL classroom might not have as much novelty as suggesting it for a science class, perhaps. However, all said and done, in a large number of ESL classrooms, whatever be the constraining factors, classes end up as traditional, teacher-centric ones, where a typical interaction be like

Teacher: Explains, demonstrates, explains, reads, tells, explains. Then asks: ‘ok, is that clear, does everyone get that yeah?’

Class: Murmurs and nods; nobody speaks.

Teacher: Great, let’s move on (Sherrington 2023)

The extracted interaction from Sherrington illustrates that this sort of one-sided teaching, without the resultant learning happening, is not emblematic of the so-called Third world, overcrowded classrooms, but is a probable example from anywhere in the world.

Sarah Cottinghatt's blogs, podcasts and books highlight the relevance of incorporating meaning making into the learning-teaching process, and advocates David Ausubel's learning theory about integrating new knowledge with existing knowledge, thereby resulting in meaningful learning.

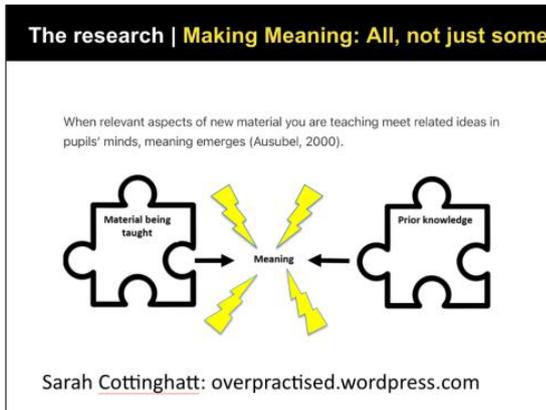


Fig. 4: Sarah Cottinghatt's model of Meaningful Learning (teacherhead.com)

Sherrington observes that though theoreticians advocate incorporating meaning making into the learning-teaching process, somehow it appears “to be a missing piece in the pedagogy with teachers hoping and assuming that meaning making is happening more or less automatically or that this might happen later” (Sherrington 2023), whereas the advantages of orienting the learning-teaching process and classroom transactions towards meaning making are manifold.

#### 2.4 Advantages of Incorporating Meaning Making into ELT classes

An AI Generated search for “Ausubel meaningful learning theory” yields a comprehensive result that details the advantages of incorporating meaning making into the learning-teaching process. By connecting the newly presented knowledge with the existing or prior knowledge, the learning-teaching process becomes goal-oriented and leads to cumulative learning, which will enhance the chances of preserving new knowledge in the long-term memory. Meaningful learning avoids mere memorization and the resultant rote learning, and results instead, in the active engagement of the learners, leading to cognitive integration and self-regulation by the learners (AI generated Google search result 2025).

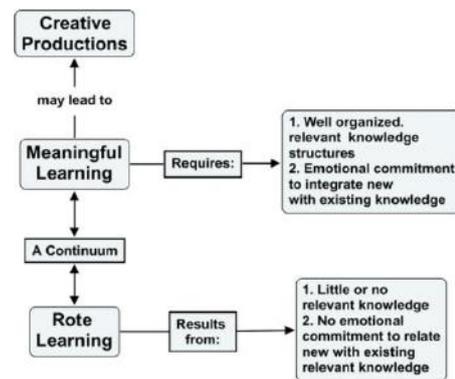


Fig. 5: Ausubel's Model of Rote versus Meaningful Learning Continuum (www.researchgate.net)

Ausubel would go on to advocate the use of Advanced Organizers by teachers in a classroom transaction in order to ensure meaning making and meaningful learning. Advanced Organizers are important because, according to Ausubel, these are “appropriately relevant and inclusive introductory materials” (cited in Bryce and Blown 2023), they “highlight what is new and important in the lesson(s) ahead; and they provide reminders of previous ideas and how they relate to what is coming. They mentally orient (or ‘set’) the learner to learn in the desired way” (Bryce and Blown 2023).

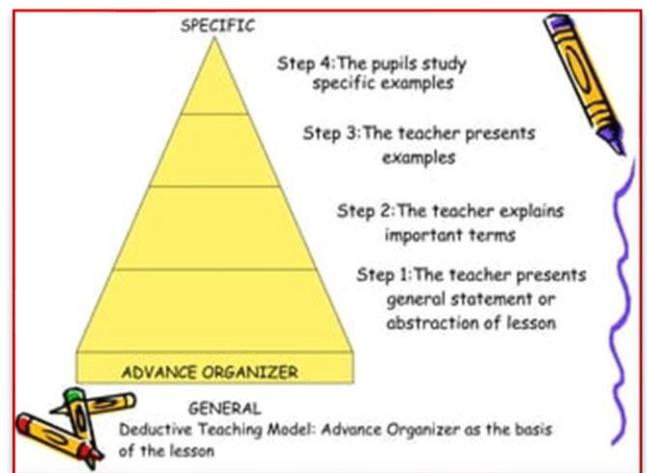


Fig. 6: Using Advance Organizer in a Lesson (https://www.xixspecials.shop/?path=page/ggitem&gpid=1619405)

The learning-teaching process, especially in a classroom setting, thus has two options: to be in the rote-learning mode or to be in the meaningful learning mode. The second option, of course, will enable the learners to

become “self-authors”, as recommended by Kegan, leading to “self-transformation”, which is the highest Order of Consciousness as proposed by Kegan, and the ultimate end of any learning process.

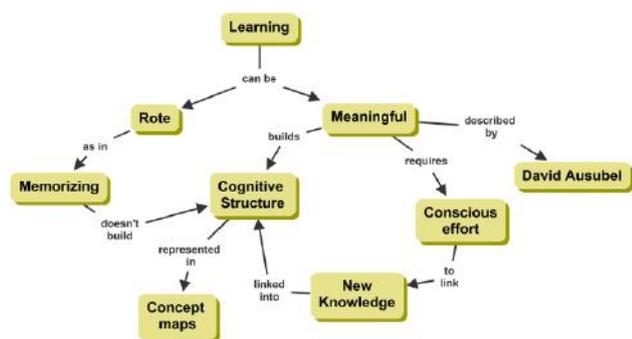


Fig. 7: Rote Learning versus Meaningful Learning

(<https://www.xixspecials.shop/?path=page/ggitem&gpid=1619452>)

## 2.5 Instances of Meaning Making in ELT

Bienkowski enlists several activities that will enable meaning making to be positioned at the centre of learning, specifically in a classroom learning situation, and these include creating collaborative dialogues, asking pertinent and suitable questions that will trigger meaning making for learners, note making, dialoguing about a text, and Socratic seminars, to mention a few specific examples. This is where understanding “comprehension” in its true sense becomes important, cautions Bienkowski, because comprehension is more about meaning-making than mere understanding of facts, as already mentioned. The prior schematics are described as mental Velcro by Marilyn Jager Adams (cited in Bienkowski 2024), since “they provide spaces for new knowledge to stick” (Bienkowski 2024). Short and swift collaborative activities such as Quotation Mingle enables activation of this mental Velcro of the learners, says Bienkowski.

Once the teacher plans and ushers in learner activities that will lead to meaning making in the classroom teaching process, rote learning will be automatically shown the way out, and active learning, constructive integration of new knowledge to existing knowledge, cumulative learning and goal-oriented self-regulated learning is bound to happen.

## 2.6 Meaning Making and Pluriliteracies

India is a country that defies many of the conventional and traditional norms and customs related to culture, language, traditions and so on. Scenarios related to ELT in India is no exception, and no one can offer a rule of

thumb regarding ELT or the methods, methodologies or practices in and of ELT. In this context, even when it is important to re-align the learning-teaching approach in the English classrooms of India, it should not be forgotten that the multicultural fabric of India is a significant factor while attempting to make meaning making a priority in English classrooms. Assumptions regarding pre-existing knowledge schema of the learners should be in sync with the actual existing knowledge structures of the learners, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be strong affective factors in this regard.

Pluriliteracies is a term that is catching up fast in academic circles, and is projected to be the new norm of educational scenario in the coming future. Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen point out that even the term “literacy” is a “socially contested term” (Gee, cited in Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2007) and that studies are problematizing the concept of “literacy as a singular knowledge or developmentally-ordered skill set; . . . unvarying across contexts and situations” (Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2007). They also point out that an “increased presence in public domains, including the web, of languages that had been previously relegated to private domains accentuates the variability, hybridity, and sense-making processes of literacy practices today” and that it is in this context that bilingualism and biliteracy are being nudged out by plurilingualism and pluriliteracies, terms that “more accurately describe the complex language practices and values of speakers in multilingual communities of the 21st century” (Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2007). Plurilingualism is not about equivalence and homogeneity, but more about “the integration of unevenly developed competences in a variety of languages, dialects, and registers, as well as the valuing of linguistic tolerance” (Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2007), more about inclusivity, flexibility and variabilities.

Coyle points out that “[t]he world we live in and the classrooms we learn in and the learners and teachers who work together are changing” and that “[a] pluriliteracies approach to learning is not about the teaching of another ‘foreign’ language, [but] it is all about strengthening cognitive pathways” necessitating “a shift in mindset, thinking outside the box in terms of designing learning, learning partnerships” (Coyle 2019). “Pluriliteracies Teaching for Learning (PTL) provides pathways for deep learning across languages, disciplines and cultures by focusing on the development of disciplinary or subject specific literacies”, according to a project run within the ECML's *Learning through*

*Languages* programme entitled "Literacies through Content and Language Integrated Learning: Effective Learning across Subjects and Languages" (ECML 2025). The report believes that PTL enables learners to become "literate in content subjects or topics" and will result in empowering "learners to successfully and appropriately communicate knowledge across cultures and languages" (ECML 2025).

### III. DISCUSSION

As Coyle observes, the world is changing rapidly, much quicker than people are used to, and countries and cultures are experiencing drastic shifts in global concerns and societal perspectives, not to mention drastic and unprecedented digital developments (2019). In this changing educational landscape, PTL and Meaning making are two concepts that are going to help teachers and learners orient towards the newly evolving world order and concerns. Bienkowski mentions that the learners must be trained to become "literate citizens in an information-rich world" (2024). This will necessitate designing their learning experiences which will facilitate their evolving into "critical consumers of information and active participants in collaborative dialogue" (Bienkowski 2024). It means that they should be provided opportunities to be creators of meaning rather than passive receptors of meaning created by someone else.

Bryce and Blown enumerate numerous examples of meaning making used successfully in various and diverse disciplines like Natural Sciences, Surgical Nursing, Languages, and also with diverse groups of students including learners with listening difficulties (2023), because in any discipline, meaning making "is the central purpose for interacting with text, producing text, participating in discussions, giving presentations, and engaging in research" (California English Language Arts & English Language Development Framework 2015 cited in ccil.cast.org). Thus, if there is a single concept that can help a teaching-learning experience become enabling to learner autonomy and long-term retention of learned knowledge, it can easily be the concept of meaning making.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Meaning making is thus a concept that needs to be prioritized while engaging in learning-teaching process, particularly in the context of classroom transactions. In the evolving context of ELT, ESL and EFL, meaning

making and PTL are inevitably going to help teachers and learners go the long way, and no one could put it better than Ausubel when he said that "[t]he task of teaching a subject to a child at any particular age is one of representing the structure of that subject in terms of the child's way of viewing things" (Ausubel cited in Bryce and Blown 2023).

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