Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching

Volume 04, Issue 2, (2014) 72-80

www.awer-center.org/gjflt/

Sociocultural theory in second language acquisition: Tenets and pedagogical implications in an EFL setting

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Suggested Citation:

Jamali, F. & Gheisari, N. (2014). Sociocultural theory in second language acquisition: Tenets and pedagogical implications in an EFL setting. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. *4*(2), 72-80.

Received 16 August, 2014; revised 20 September, 2014; accepted 14 October, 2014.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University.
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Abstract

The rise of sociolinguistic and contextual approaches in L2 research over the past decade reflects a growing recognition that learning a language is a more complex process than merely acquiring linguistic structures, and that language learning and use are shaped by sociopolitical approach. Although a lot of attention has been paid to linguistic and cognitive side of the issue in SLA, language socialization as a newly emerged approach does not seem to have caught the eyes of those involved in the profession of language teaching and pedagogy despite its strong theoretical supports. Learning, from perspective of sociocultural theory of mind, is not information processing carried out by individuals. It is , instead, a form of language socialization between individuals who try to collaboratively co-construct the type of knowledge, here language, through the process of mediation by means of language as a semiotic tool. Vygotsky,s sociocultural theory has been widely referred to in the field of second language learning (SLL) research. Adopting sociocultural theory offers researchers theoretical perspectives with which to examine language learning as a social practice, consider students as active participants in constructing learning processes, and investigate the interaction between different factors involved. To this end, the present research, laying out language socialization as a theoretical and methodological approach in second language acquisition, aims to explore the central concepts of socioculutural theory, and to put the vast majority of key approaches and concepts in a nutshell so that the intended readers can easily get familiar with those fundamentals of language socialization as an important theoretical perspective in the field of second and foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: EFL, Sociolinguistic, Second language.

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1. Introduction

A substantial progress has been made in developing a model of the sociolinguistic processes that inform second language acquisition. This model is supported by empirical evidence on the relationship between social context and second language use and acquisition, which shows that learners' second language (L2) input and processing of L2 input in social settings are socially mediated, that social and linguistic context affect linguistic use, choice, and development, and that learners intentionally assert social identities through their L2 in communicating in social contexts (Firth &Wagner, 1997). According to sociocultural theory, learning is mediated by cultural artifacts of which language is the most important and of utmost priority. As Anton and Di Camilla (1999) put it, language and thought are bound together, with the language as the key semiotic tool that acts as a mediator for thinking both within the individuals and between individuals, i.e. language is a symbolic tool by which human being interact with the world around and begin to make sense of it. Vygotsky (1981) emphasizes the interaction between people, their environment, and peers, helps to activate student's learning in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), internalize the learning process, and eventually construct development. Learning is first seen as social than individual, first intermental and then intramental. That is, learning happens on two planes, social and mental. On the social plane, the learner, by help of experts and other assistant groups including artifacts, especially language among others, try to first co-construct knowledge in the external world, and then, through verbalization and collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) internalizes the socially constructed thought. For this process of external construction of thought and its subsequent transmitting to the mind, language acts as a mediator, as a tool which helps to shape the thought.

The key component of sociocultural theory is mediated learning. In view of vygotsky and followers Van lier, (2003); Lantolf (2000); and Wells (1999), among others , learning is a process of joint constructive interaction mediated by tools such as numbers and arithmetic, art, music, and most important of all, language. Mediation is defined as , '' to act as a peace maker between opposing poles'' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2007). In Fact, Sociocultural theorists strongly believe the fact that a child can learn and improve his/her own abilities in proximity of mediating tools and without the presence of the tools, it is not possible for humans to act directly on the world (Lantolf & Appel, 1994) and the peace maker or mediator is the prerequisite for acting upon the world. Mind is, in Vygotsky,s tradition, mediated and human consciousness is a mediated mental activity. In fact, it is through the mediation of psychological tools (Vygotsky, 1987) that people control their physical and mental behavior. Among those psychological tools, language as the most outstanding one serves as a mediator for individual's mental activity. Here, it is of significance to know that Vygotsky makes a distinction between language as the most fundamental psychological tool, and other physical tools which lend a hand with the cognitive development of the human being. Language, unlike physical tools by means of which people act upon the world, is a symbolic tool for both acting upon the world and for development of mental activities via the interaction of external tools and symbols with the language (Aljafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). It is through the process of mediation of external activities that social thoughts are transformed into mental ones. Lantolf (2000a) refers to three types of mediation: 1- mediation by others in social interaction 2- mediation by self through private speech, and mediation by artifacts for example tasks and technology, and the essence of sociocultural theory lies in the fact that learners can appropriate mediation (make them adjustable to the potential mental ability of the learners and internalize them)as their symbolic tools through those three mediating means serve as external mediations to bring about internal higher order thought processes. In the present paper, the authors first try to shed some light on the key contributing factors to socioculutural theory (scaffolding, activity theory, ZPD, from other regulation to self-regulation, internalization from interpsychological to intapsychological functioning, collaborative dialogue, and contingency among others), and then, discus the relatedness of those sociocultural tenets to learning especially L2 learning with regard to EFL contexts where exposure to enough required L2 input, despite ESL and natural settings, lags behind. Thereafter, the pedagogical implications of the components of sociocultural theory for SLA classes will be brought under the spotlight.

2. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)-2

Zone of proximal development is one of the key components in the tradition of sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as the difference between the child's developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development under the adult guidance or in collaboration with other peers. Here, the concept of collaboration represents the fact that the kind of interaction which is balanced between the two parties could not be within the learner's ZPD, and therefore not to the advantage for any potential development. That is, we cannot talk of collaboration and development unless the tool upon which the two parties are supposed to act upon the world is potentially supporting for the less able party, the learner. In fact, scaffold guidance which is the primary feature of learning process (Vygotsky,1978) in a parent-child conversational dyad is considered interactional (collaborative in sociocultural SLA terminology), when knowledge imbalance is central to the nature of scaffolding and collaborative assistance as such (Wells,1999). One partner must necessarily know more than the other and must approach the teaching dynamic with the final goal of having the person receiving scaffolding no longer in need of any assistance or collaboration in the end state. In fact, as one of key concepts in sociocultural theory, ZPD has received a lot of attention, and as a consequence, different terminologies have emerged within three decades. Swain (2000) refers to the kind of dialogue contributing the potential development of the learner as ''collaborative dialogue''. Wells (1999) has chosen to use the phrase '' problem-solving dialogue.'' Still, Lantolf goes further to define it as a '' the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can accomplish when acting with support from someone else or form a cultural artifact''. Wells (1999) emphasizes the fact that ZPD is not just for the less skillful member, it is an opportunity for learning with and from others and applies potentially to all the participants. According to Aljafreh and Lantolf (1994), in the ZPD, a learner performs above his or her level of individual competence with the assistance of another; development occurs as the learner acts with increasing independence.

In a nutshell, the key concept which lies in the words of those who have referred to ZPD is that there is some sort of potential ability within the learner which needs collaboration to trigger off and cause subsequent development , and that is the nature and the implementing process of that assistance which marks the critical steps taken to the benefit of the under-assistance person. However, related to the concept of ZPD within the sociocultural literature are two more socioculturally-related key terms, namely scaffolding and other regulation which will be the next topic brought under the scrutiny in what follows.

Scaffolding, in fact, in neo-vygotskyan discussions has been developed as a required step for other regulation within the developer's ZPD which is most helpful for appropriation of new concepts. It is through scaffolding, developmentally appropriate assisted performance in Swain's terms that the learner is provided with the required ZPD through collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000). Scaffolding, the provision of developmentally appropriate assistance, is, in fact, not only dependent upon attention to what the peer interlocutor is able to do, but upon the sensitivity to the person's readiness for support, which is communication through subtle interactional cues.

In this regard, one can claim that scaffolding is not that simple when the assistant is going to regulate the person under development. Learning or functioning, which for Vygotsky is a socially situated activity, appears on two planes, first on interpsychological plane which needs to be skillfully other-regulated through scaffolding, and then on inter psychological plane which needs to be internally self-regulated through private and inner speech.

By far, research on scaffolding in language learning has demonstrated how learners who are working together reach a higher level of performance by providing assistance to one another (Brook, 1992; Donato, 1994). In sum, scaffolding and other regulation are two sides of the same coin called socially appropriate assistance that can push the learner's current ZPD forward so that the learner can appropriate and subsequently internalize the potentially ready-to-catch concepts and functions. When it comes to language learning, especially in EFL contexts, despite the viewpoints of mainstream SLA which target the linguistic elements as processes to be

transformed into intake, scaffolding within the ZPD of the under-assistance person contains all socially appropriate variables which in line with linguistic ones become the focus of collaboration.

3. From Appropriation to Internalization-4

The essence of sociocultural theory is to appropriate the symbolic tool, language, through the three mediating types clarified by Lantolf (2000a), that is mediation by others, by self, and by artifacts. It is , in fact, through scaffolding the learners by collaborative and problem solving dialogue (Swain, 2000; Wells, 1999) adjusted by those mediation types that internal mediation is brought about. To help the learners make the ZPD appropriated to their own ability level, loads of reformulations of incorrect utterances may take place during the through-collaborative-dialogue scaffolding process. So, for the input to become intake, terminology taken from mainstream SLA, or in a sociocultural perspective, to become mentally appropriated and internalized, a cyclical process of formulation and reformulation occurs in lieu of collaborative dialogue and scaffolding and within the ZPD of the learner.

As Donato (1998) discusses, the expert or collaborator, through optimized collaborative dialogue, provides the learner with the opportunity to use language and more importantly to reflect on their own language. The co-constructed dialogue represents a cognitive activity which serves as a transitional mechanism from the social to the internal plane of functioning. Here, appropriation comes about as a result of collaborative dialogue aimed at problem solving and hence knowledge building and ultimate internalizing. When one of the participants utters something, the saying and what is said, process and product, provide an objective for reflection. The saying is the cognitive activity, attempt to appropriate or absorb, concepts in the learner's terms and the outcome is the ultimate internalized product. By means of constant saying and reflecting on what is said, knowledge has been co-constructed and internalization has taken place. So, the responsibility of the collaborator is both complicated and sensitive in lieu of the fact he/she should professionally know how , through physical administrative and symbolic tools, make the social speech, with varying degrees of difficulty, appropriate to the potential mental level of the learner so that it becomes internalized with minimum challenge and illogical effort.

To add more, as far as collaborative assistance and instruction in EFL settings is concerned, since exposure to target language as a symbolic tool is not sufficient, the appropriation of accessible input becomes more critical and hence requires special professionals who are familiar with the tenets of development in under the guidelines of sociocultural SLA .

4. Collaborative dialogue and contingency-5

The notion of collaborative dialogue is of special importance for proponents of sociocultural SLA. According to Vygotsky (1978), in sociocultural learning, individuals are not constrained by their own comprehension. Instead, teachers and learners are afforded opportunities to mediate and assist each other in the creation of the ZPD in which each party learns and develops. That is the focus is not on just linguistic input which is made comprehensible by assistance from the teacher. Rather, both the teacher and the learner are essentially involved in the social practice of the assistance that shapes, constructs, and influences within interactional and institutional context (Donato, 1988; 1994). To this end, collaborative dialogue and contingency are two types of phenomena that come to the fore. Collaborative dialogue, which according to Merrill Swain mediates acquisition, is a dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. Here, learning a language is seen the same as other kinds of learning in which the learner goes to any length to overcome the problem, to be able to comprehend and be comprehended, and to build the required knowledge through interaction, collaboration, participation, and creation of knowledge by means of social and mental tools. In this vein, the notion of ''affordance'' or ecological social interaction from the Van Lier (2002) is of appropriateness which states that comprehensible input or output as feedback (as used in

mainstream SLA) just focus on language as a process, whereas , in sociocultural SLA, language is seen as a tool, symbolic, which besides other artifacts causes knowledge building and cognitive development. However, one must not forget the fact that collaborative dialogue as a key contributor to language development in Sociocultural SLA is determining whenever there is enough contingency, moment to moment contribution and reflection between teachers and learners, which in itself, as referred to in the previous topic, is of utmost sensitivity and requires special professionalism so that optimum internalization and knowledge building occur. That is the experts must rephrase and modify their instruction according to the type of feedback they receive from the learners through questions and symbols of misunderstanding, and this kind of rephrasing, modification, feedback adjustment and reactions to symbols of misunderstanding make use of tasks viable in sociocultural SLA.

5. Use of Tasks as Social Tools of Mediation and Development-6

In Sociocultural SLA, language learning involves both the means for mediating learning; i.e., the tools, and the language itself; i.e., the object (Ellis, 2003). As Merrill Swain puts it, language learning is how to use language to mediate learning. The type of mediation which according to Lantolf (2000a), as referred to previously in this article , is highlighted as three kinds, namely mediation by the self, by others, and by artifacts, technology, and tasks among others, as appropriate for internalization and ultimate creation of language knowledge. Of course, the fact that must not be forgotten is that tasks as social tools can play essential role in all three kinds of mediation which are seen as the essence of sociocultural theory of mind since it is through these kinds of external mediations 'tasks' that internalization, appropriation, and subsequent creation can come about.

Here, as (Sfrad,1998) puts it, sociocultural theorists prefer to use metaphor of ''participation'' rather than ''acquisition'' to emphasize the fact that development, rather than learning, is not so much a matter of taking in and the possession of knowledge, but rather of the taking part in social activity. In this regard, and according to Lantolf (2000a), the development is about the appropriation by either individuals or groups of the meditational means 'tasks among others' which are made present in the environment to improve control of the participants over their own mental functioning.

In the emerging literature on the new paradigm to mainstream SLA which is labeled sociocultural SLA by Lantolf (2000a), the computational metaphore of SLA , the idea of human mind as a black box containing the knowledge which results from processing linguistic input which will later be accessed for the desired output, is somehow going out of favor. The long history of research and practice within the long-term- surviving period of mainstream SLA, which has been mostly focusing on input, interaction, output, and linguistic forms and mostly target language as an object of investigation seems to be in need of revision, re-conceptualization, and re-application in the domain of newly-emerged sociocultural SLA which emphasizes the fact that language is both knowledge ''object of investigation'' and use '' how to apply that knowledge to create more higher –order knowledge.

To this end, to create more knowledge of higher-order mediated means, tasks can be seen as the vital social tools that come to the help of language which itself is a semiotic tool in need of other contributing tools to improve . In sociocultural theory, such frequently used key terms as intersubjectivity, sharing common motive and goals for performing the task, scaffolding and collaborative dialogue, and ZPD suggest obligatory use of different kinds of tasks as external means at the service of internalization and appropriation . However, the notion of the task with regard to its complexity, both linguistic and cognitive, is of high sensitivity which , in itself, even becomes more sensitive when the learners and their different linguistic, personal characteristics come to interaction with such setting variables as cultural, social, and contextual ones. Some research, Nassaji and Cumming (2000) on the nature of scaffolding and how it changes with increase in writing proficiency, Dicamilla and Anton (1997) on the variation of type of contribution and scaffolding help that participants, here learners, provide for each other, Donato (1994) on type of assisted collaboration in oral activity, and Lapkin (1998) on joint

solution to linguistic problems in a jigsaw task can be seen as illuminating but not conclusive at all, regarding the nature of the task and one hundred and one related variables that come in during the process of development and co-construction of language knowledge.

To sum up, tasks, although proved to be vital for the participatory language development, cannot be linguistically defined and classified in advanced, since, in the perspective of sociocultural SLA, it is not the task and external nature which is of value. Instead, the activity that results from a pre-planned task essentially during a moment to moment collaboration, verbalization, appropriation, and final internalization is of top priority, and this in turn, depends on social, cultural, contextual, and personal variables. That is, the same task performed in two different classroom settings will result in two different types of end results since the type of activity, scaffolding and collaboration, ZPD, Proficiency level of learners and teachers among others, make the task-performing conditions quite versatile and vulnerable to moment to moment changing conditions. So, instead of immature sensitivity to the type of input and materials designed for sociocultural instructional contexts, that's the nature of the task, the learning context, and the collaborator of the development which might take precedence in approaching future, and with the results of more empirical investigation in the field.

6. Use of the L1 as a Collaborating contributor-7

Many language teachers today were trained in a philosophy that espouses a learning environment in which the target language (L2) is to be used at all times. This philosophy applies to teachers as well as to students. Communicative approaches to language learning, because of the fear of L1 transfer, encourage students to engage as early as possible in creating meaning and say little about the role that the native language (L1) should play in the L2 classroom. Van de Craats, (2003) Spada and Lightbown, (1999) and Lightbown and Spada (2000) comment on the occurrence of such interference of L1 in second and foreign language learners within a communicative language learning context. On the contrary, collaboration in pair and small group is welcomed both in mainstream and sociocultural SLA. Studies such as (Lapkin & Swain, 1998; Pica, 1994; Storch,1998 among others) have supported the use of pair and small group in the classroom. Krashen, (1981)’s input hypothesis, and Long's interaction hypothesis put emphasis on the sufficiency and necessity of input through interactive dyads including comprehension check, clarification request, and confirmation check as preconditions for successful language learning. Sociocultural SLA, on the other hand, purports to the type of language development which comes about as a result of contextually appropriate interaction. That is the learner, through socially developmental and contingent dyads, move from his/her own actual level of development to the level of potential development (Vygotsky, 1978). As Wells (1999) puts it, through such collaborative activities as pair and group work among learners within the potential ZPD of the less able member of the collaboratively assistant pair or group, the higher order cognitive development can come about. Yet, the sacred opinion of ''no use of L1 in the L2 instructional settings'' comes under critical attack when the collaborative assistance is between those who lack threshold L2 competence to hold and develop collaboration through the L2 language. Many studies (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Upton & Lee- Thompson, 2001; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003) indicate that L1 use is not detrimental to the process of development and could even serve as contributing factor to the learning development. According to Anton and Di Camilla (1998), L1 use in L2 instructional settings is a semiotic, psychological tool which enables the participants to perform three important functions: scaffolding, intersubjectivity, and private speech, which are among key sociocultural concepts to cognitive development. It seems that the use of L1 as a collaborative tool for L2 development seems quite necessary in the preliminary processes of L2 development, where the L2 learner lacks the threshold language related elements necessary for mutual comprehension between collaborator and those who are to be collaborated.

7. Socioculutural SLA and pedagogical implications for EFL settings

As it was mentioned in the previous section, the usefulness of L1 as a cognitive and mediating learning tool has been gaining significance for some time already (DiCamilla & Anton, 1998; Cook, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Macaro, 2009). Swain and Lapkin (2000) acknowledge that "to insist that no use be made of the L1 in carrying out tasks that are both linguistically and cognitively complex is to deny the use of an important cognitive tool" , and this in reality gains vital significance and credibility when it comes to language instruction in EFL settings. As it is not possible for in-an-EFL- setting instructor to stimulate the scaffolding in L2 within the ZPD of the language learner especially in the preliminary steps of L2 development where the learner lacks the ability to use the L2 as a symbolic tool, the use of the L1 as a contributing tool becomes practical. More importantly, within the perspective of sociocultural SLA, the language being learned is the object of investigation the same as any other kind of cognitive development. With the constant reformulation and reconceptualization of the concept language proficiency, language ability in Bachman's term (Bachman, 1990), the credibility of near native speaker is losing its dependability, the phenomenon which weakens the position of such concepts of language transfer and interference in the learning process.

Within the tenets of sociocultural SLA, it is the social appropriateness of the symbolic tool which comes as a necessity in the service of mutual collaboration and knowledge appropriation not near native competence/performance dichotomy supported by proponents of mainstream SLA. This, in turn, demands changes in attitudes of both instructors and testers, the kind of change which costs a fortune both with regard to time and money to come about, since it is very painstaking to retrain the involved personnel who have lived and gained experience within the pedagogical tenets of communicative competence approach to language teaching, the tenets which in principle relegate any probable use of learner's L1 in the classroom.

Another example of the cognitive mediating role of the symbolic tool L1 comes in the form of the inner speech of the learners (de Guerrero, 2005); as learners' silent monologues occur usually in L1 and constitute essential cognitive activities for both learning and thinking processes. According to sociocultural SLA, learning is mediated by various '' cultural artifacts' 'of which language is the primary example. Language, looked at as a symbolic tool within sociocultural SLA, plays the most important part in the learning development, be that L2 development or any kind of development. With this in mind, in the EFL settings, despite natural or ESL contexts where the learners are flooded with L2 input, the opportunity for providing sufficient required input for the L2 learners is sketchy and contextually situated. More specifically, as far as the functioning by experts within the ZPD of the novices, through scaffolding and application of appropriate tasks in the EFL setting is concerned, it is quite demanding that the L2 as language of collaboration and problem-solving is the most vital tool. So, it seems that in the expert/novice dyads, the L2 use is the key tool for appropriating and follow-up internalization of L2 chunks and routinized expressions, the process which needs support of the L1 as a supporting collaborator than obligatory hindrance.

8. Conclusion

L2 learning has, during the past three decades, undergone different fluctuations. With introduction of psychology and processing constraints, alongside Chomsky's universal grammar, a great role was ascribed to the brain as the central processor of the input. Following the introduction of social dimensions and Vygotsky,s sciocultural theory of mind, factors external to the learner gained significance. Following Vygotsky,s terminology, it is suggested that learning, whether language or any other kind of learning, happens on two planes: first it happens on the social plane through interaction and collaboration between learners and collaborators by means of such social tools as scaffolding and assistance within the ZPD of the learner, and then it happens on the mental plane through such collaborating means as private speech and self-regulation.

When it comes to L2 learning in EFL settings, due to lack of enough exposure and socially situated proper opportunity compared to ESL or natural settings, the role of collaborator (whether an expert or fellow students) and collaborating materials becomes highly evident.To this end, the notions '' collaborative problem-solving'' (Wells, 1999) and ''Collaborative dialogue'' (Swain, 2000) which refer to student's making utterances and responding to each other in a problem-solving contexts are eligible indicators of the fact L2 development in the contexts where use of L2 for the developing process is not practical, the L1 of the learners could come to the fore. And this in turn reveals the fact that the extent to which the L1 can and should be used in the foreign language classroom, particularly by learners, can be treated productively when seen through a sociocultural framework. Since, as was reiterated, language according to this theory is more than simply a means by which we communicate messages. It is a mediating tool to create knowledge. This function of language as a tool determines to a great extent how we establish a framework for using L1 that still minimizes the chance for transfer and negative language-learning results. However, more research regarding the nature of collaboration, type of tasks, the degree of assistance within the learner's real ZPD and other related variables is required so that the tenets become more illuminating and contributory to sociocultural SLA.

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