

## Sociocultural Theory and Its Contributions to ESL/FL Classroom Research and Instruction

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### Abstract

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is originated from his ideas and works emphasizing on consciousness; thus, making his theory different from behavioral and nativist theories. Unlike behaviorism and nativism, this theory views social interaction as the key factor for human beings to develop their consciousness and cognition. Through interaction with more knowledgeable persons and with the support of cultural tools or artifacts (physical and abstract thing), an individual transforms from other-regulation to self-regulation-the state that this individual can do things on his/her own. The process of this transformation is apparent under the three significant constructs of this theory, namely-the Zone of Proximal Development, Activity Theory,

and Private Speech. Based on this concept, the sociocultural theory significantly contributes to the field of education, especially to ESL and EFL classroom instruction and a large scale of ESL and EFL research.

### บทคัดย่อ

ทฤษฎี Sociocultural มีจุดกำเนิดมาจากความคิดและงานของ Vygotsky ที่เป็นในเรื่องของภาวะจิต หรือความตระหนักในความคิดและความรู้สึกก่อนทำให้ทฤษฎีนี้แตกต่างจากทฤษฎี behavioral และ nativist โดยทฤษฎี Sociocultural นี้ ให้ความสำคัญกับการปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมของมนุษย์ว่าเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่นำไปสู่การพัฒนาของภาวะจิตและปัญญา เนื่องเพราะการปฏิสัมพันธ์ของสังคม โดยเฉพาะกับผู้ที่มีความรู้และประสบการณ์

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มากกว่าพร้อมกัน การเอื้อประโยชน์ของวัตถุทางสังคม ทำให้ปัจเจกบุคคล เปลี่ยนแปลงจากการถูกชี้นำหรือควบคุมโดยผู้อื่นมาสู่การชี้นำและควบคุม อันเป็นภาวะที่ทำให้บุคคลนั้นสามารถทำสิ่งต่างๆ ได้ด้วยตนเอง ขบวนการของการเปลี่ยนแปลงนี้สามารถเห็นได้ชัดเจนผ่านโครงสร้างย่อยของทฤษฎีที่สำคัญ ๓ โครงสร้าง คือ Zone of Proximal Development, Activity Theory และ Private Speech แนวความคิดนี้ ทำให้ทฤษฎี Sociocultural เอื้อประโยชน์อย่างมากต่อวงการการศึกษา โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง ต่อการเรียนการสอนในชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สองและภาษาต่างประเทศ (และต่องานวิจัย)

## Introduction

Sociocultural theory, a theory of human mental processing (Lantolf & Appel, 1994), though has been known and accepted for only about two decades, has made its significant contribution to ESL and EFL educational practice, and a large scale of ESL and EFL research. The theory is originated from the ideas and works of Vygotsky, especially the one about consciousness. Vygotsky (1978) strongly disagreed with Behaviorism Psychology that denies the consciousness, while at the same time maintains firmly that all existing psychological phenomena are primarily derived from reflex-like behavior (Kozulin, 1998). Vygotsky (1978) explained that because psychology refused to study consciousness, it deprived itself of "some rather important and complex problems of human behavior. It is

forced to restrict itself to explaining no more than the most elementary connections between a living thing and the world" (p. 5). For Vygotsky, consciousness is more than awareness of each individual's cognitive ability, but a key element that distinguishes human behavior from that of other living beings and links each individual's knowledge to his behavior. To his vision, consciousness is composed of the self-regulatory mechanisms and functions as planning, voluntary attention, logical memory, problem solving, and evaluation that humans deploy in solving problems (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). This consciousness of an individual is built from outside and developed through actual relations and interactions between the individual and others (Kozulin, 1986; 1998). Vygotsky also rejected another view of Behaviorism that human develops as the unfolding of inborn faculties, or as a passive recipient to the environment (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Kozulin, 1998). On the contrary, he stated that human transforms from lower order or natural mental functions (e.g., elementary perception, memory, attention, and will) to higher order or cultural psychological functions (e.g., thinking, voluntary attention, logical memory, decision making, and comprehension of language). This transformation appears under the influence of psychological tools (symbolic mediators), or means of interpersonal communication. In the process of transformation, the lower functions do not disappear but become superseded and incorporated into the cultural ones (Kozulin, 1986; 1998). Vygotsky saw this transformation as possible through the mediating function of



culturally constructed artifacts including tools, symbols and an elaborate sign, such as language. Within this transformation, children move from other-regulation to self-regulation to master their own psychological behavior (Wertsch, 1979).

Cognitive development is another important idea of Vygotsky (1981, cited in Kozulin, 1998) to learning and instruction. He argued that cognitive development is not a slow and gradual accumulation of change, but abrupt occurrences or revolutionary processes and appears to be dependent on the mastery of symbolic mediators (Kozulin, 1998). According to this idea, children's cognitive development arises as a result of interactions with adults or more capable others in purposeful and mediated activities (Wertsch, 1985). Additionally, children's cognitive development should be studied in the social and historical context within which it occurs not in an isolated individual.

## Sociocultural Theory

### The basic assumptions

From the discussion in the introduction, basic assumptions of Sociocultural theory can be drawn as follows:

- 1) Education and learning lead development.
- 2) Development is a continuous process that does not stop at or fossilize over a certain time or age.
- 3) Development illustrates human's attempt to gain control through object-regulation, other-regulation,

and self-regulation.

- 4) Learning and development occur by means of interactions in which a child interacts with an expert in mediated activities.
- 5) Learning is a situated activity occurring in social interaction and social context.

These assumptions are different from those of mainstream second and foreign language acquisition theories, especially those of the innatist theory. The first assumption, education and learning lead development, is entirely opposite to Krashen's natural order hypothesis which assumes that development precedes learning. This hypothesis states that humans acquire the rules of language along the natural order and this natural order is independent of the order in which rules have been taught (Krashen, 1985). Development does not stop or fossilize, the second assumption, strongly rejects Krashen's critical period hypothesis and the notion of fossilization which claim that humans are capable of acquiring language until the age of puberty, around thirteen, and that fossilization can occur in interlanguage over time and is difficult to be corrected.

The rest of the assumptions are remarkably different from Krashen's notions of Monitor Model and Natural Order Hypothesis and Chomsky's universal grammar (UG) and language acquisition device (LAD). From sociocultural stance, L2 acquisition entails more than the mastery of the linguistic properties of L2, but encompasses the dialectic interaction to



create meaning (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995). Moreover, learning and development that emerges from communication arises in the coming-together of people with identities, histories and linguistic resources (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). This view is against the notion Natural Order Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) that states that learners are born with LAD that enables them to receive and comprehend input containing linguistic features at I+1 and learners do not need to converse for language to be acquired. This sociocultural view is also diverse from Chomsky's UG (1997) which claimed that language is governed by a set of highly abstract principles that comprise a child's innate knowledge.

In the light of research, both sociocultural theory (SCT) and mainstream SL theory possess different research perspectives. SL and FL researchers base their framework on the information-processing model which perceives discourse as a result of decoding, encoding, and modifying internal representations of the new language. For them, verbal interaction is operationalized as a series of stimulus-response exchange (Pica et al., 1991). Therefore, in discourse analysis, SL and FL research is emphasized on linguistic components, such as syntax and vocabulary, error analysis, and on code-switching. Sociocultural researchers argue that the model of encoding-decoding "fails to capture how utterances interact with social realities, evoking transformations of the social situation and constituting them" (Brooks & Donato, 1994, p.263). Therefore, they base their research

framework on psycholinguistic and semiotic processes whose purpose of speaking is viewed as a message exchange between people and as a cognitive tool that enables humans to control themselves, others, and objects, such as language and tasks (Brooks, Donato, & McGlone, 1997). In the aspect of task and activity, researchers in SL and FL acquisition frequently employ experimental tasks, which are constant, in order to elicit a particular behavior from the subject because they believe that these tasks and the resulting behavior are scientifically controllable and measurable (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). On the contrary, according to the sociocultural perspective, language tasks are neither constant nor generalizable because activities vary according to participants and circumstances. In addition, tasks do not manipulate learners to act in the same ways and even a trivial task can supply important forms of mediation helping students to gain control over language and task procedures (Donato, 1999).

Sociocultural constructs, such as ZPD, semiotic mediation, activity theory, private speech, and internalization, have been found to have a considerable contribution to better understand language learning and instruction. The three sociocultural constructs that help magnifying the understanding of how learning and instruction take place in SL and FL classrooms are the ZPD, activity theory, and private speech.

### **The Zone of Proximal Development**

ZPD is said to be a central concept

within Vygotsky's theory and has been the most important legacy to education in the English-speaking world (Dixon-Krauss, 1996). Vygotsky (1978, p. 86). defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" Operationally, it is defined as a zone illustrating the distance between the students' level of independent problem solving and the level of his or her problem solving when it is guided or facilitated by other more competent individuals (Well, 1999; Kozulin, 1998). The notion of the ZPD has significant consequences for both learning assessment and teaching practices.

In the issue of assessment, Vygotsky (1986) argued the task of assessment must identify the cognitive processes of the child that are fully developed and those that are in the state of being developed. This development occurs under the influence of cooperative interaction between the child and more capable others, who represent the culture and assist the child in acquiring the necessary symbolic tools of learning. The difference of the results of performance with and without help indicate the ZPD. The ZPD can be interpreted qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitatively, it indicates the cognitive functions that are absent in the child's unaided performance, but appear when the child is aided by adult. Quantitatively, the ZPD measures the difference between unaided and aided performance of the child. Also, ZPD can

be interpreted as reflecting the actual ability of the child to benefit cooperative learning and assistance from adults. The child with narrow ZPD will have a certain limited ability to benefit from the instruction provided by adults. (Kozulin, 1998; Well, 1999).

The assessment practices above lead to the provision of appropriate instruction. Although Vygotsky did not specify the nature of instruction in the context of ZPD, a diversity in the instructional approaches has been developed on the basis of his ideas. There are approaches that establish the ZPD either of a class as a whole or of groups within the class and modify instructional input and task demands accordingly. In either case, much emphasis should be put on the importance of activities being meaningful and relevant to students at the time that they engage in them (Well, 1995 cited in Well, 1999). According to these approaches, the ZPD is created in the interaction between the student and more capable co-participants in an activity. The student's cognitive and linguistic development depends on observing, participating, and interacting with co-participants. Through dialogue and guided participation, the coparticipants challenge, support, and finally empower him/her to find solutions for tasks on his/her own (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in AdairHauck & Donato, 1994). This semiotic mediation fosters learning and provides a meaningful context for the student to use target language not only for problem solving but also for communication.

The notion of semiotic mediation

provides a theoretical basis for the classroom practice of cooperative learning. Donato (1994) has proposed collective scaffolding to solve the problem of class size or time constraint in which teachers are unable to provide dialogic assistance for each student. He has documented through his study that, in collective scaffolding, students can provide guided support to their peers during collaborative interaction in ways similar to expert scaffolding. Through collective scaffolding, students' collaborative interaction facilitates assistance and semiotic mediation and makes possible learning and development.

### Activity Theory

Another notion about learning according to sociocultural theory is that it is a situated activity and is visible through interactions within social interaction and social context as learners struggle to achieve control of the task (Kinginger, 1989, cited in Brooks & Donato, 1994). Learners invest their goals, actions, background and belief into task they are engaged in (Donato, 1999). From the perspective of activity theory, tasks are not fixed or generalized. Rather, they are internally constructed through spontaneous verbal interactions of learners during actual task performance (Books & Doanto, 1994). The same task may create different activities, because activities are unique depending on learners. As Coughlan and Duff (1994) argue, "a linguistic event never duplicates a past one, and can never be truly replicated in the future" (p.190). By comparison, task is a kind of behavioral

blueprint provided to subjects in order to elicit linguistic data, whereas activity refers to the behavior that is actually produced when an individual performs a task" (Coughlan & Duff, 1994, p. 175).

Based on Vygotskian theory, Leontiev proposed three distinct levels of analysis of explanatory framework of Activity Theory: activity, actions, and operation, in order to explain what the individual or group does in particular setting (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Activity, the highest level of analysis, is the sociocultural setting where collaborative interaction and assisted performance occurs (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Activity consists of the process of conducting task and task outcome which is unique. The same task can be performed differently over time when repeated by the same learner, or may be interpreted in different ways by different learners although the contexts encompassing such a task appear to be similar (Coughlan & Duff, 1994).

Activity is linked to the concept of motive (Wertsch, 1985, cited in Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Motive is important because it describes the learner's socially-derived interpretation of event: "why" they engaged in the activity.

The second of the analysis consists of actions. According to Leontiev (1981, cited in Lantolf & Appel, 1994) actions have two important features. First, any given action can be embedded in a different activity. Second, they are the level of an activity at which the process is subordinated to a concrete goal. Goals are referred not to as physical objects but

phenomena of anticipatory reflection. The goal of an activity functions as a kind of regulator of the activity and can be segmented into subgoals. Each learner may have the goal in performing an activity, but in order to fulfill this goal, he or she must realize the underlined subgoals. Another important feature of goals is that they are not stable; that is, individuals can modify, postpone, or abandon goal (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Kozulin, 1986).

Operations largely determine the means through which an action is carried out. They are bound to the actual circumstances and conditions under which a goal is realized. In this condition, operations can be converted into goals or subgoals as an action is carried out. This transformation is essential to fully understanding a given activity. Operations usually become automatized procedure, but once they reach this status, they do not remain so forever (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Brooks and Donato (1994) and Donato (1999) indicate the contribution of the Activity Theory to SL and FL learning, instruction, and research. First, in research aspect, because language task is not generalizable and although the task may be the same, the activity it generates will be unique; therefore, in task-based FL research, the focus of the analysis should be on activity instead of on the task outcome.

Second, in terms of learning, tasks do not manipulate learners to act in a particular way because learners bring their own goals, actions, cultural backgrounds and beliefs into tasks and

transform it. When the teacher assigns the task that is not truly related to the learner's motives of learning, the learner often re-negotiates the goal and employs easy operation to cope with the requirement of the task. What the learner does is complying with, not engaging in the task. In this situation, the activity shows that the task is not meaningful (without the learner's engagement) although the task outcome fits into the teacher's expectation. Thus, the teacher should provide the learner with opportunity to build his own tasks, to establish necessary goals, and to regulate himself in order to move from compliance to engagement.

Third, a seemingly-non-relevant task may provide learners with important forms of mediation helping them to gain control over language and task procedures. Consequently, in task-based FL learning, the teacher should be more concerned with the way the learner orients and regulates himself to complete the task through interactions with the language, than the outcome of the language use.

The study of Donato and McCormick (1994) illustrates how FL learning can be more meaningful when the teacher provides learners with opportunity that allows them to develop their own strategies "to self-assess, set goals, plan course of action to fulfill these goals, and identify themes in their own learning" (p. 459).

#### Inner Speech and Private Speech

According to Vygotsky (1986), the earliest speech of the child is already social and consists of two functions (Kozulin, 1998). The

primary function of speech is its communicative or interpersonal function. This function helps the child to establish social contact, carry out social interactions, and coordinate in social encounters or activities. The egocentric function is intrapersonal and cognitive. This egocentric speech plays a central role in developing and conducting mental activities. A remarkable characteristic of egocentric speech is that it does not disappear, but goes "underground" as verbal thought or into inner speech (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Precisely speaking, inner speech is "a product of the transformation and internalization of the egocentric speech-for-oneself that is an essential stage in the development of inner forms of verbal reasoning and self-regulation" (Kozulin, 1998, p. 21).

Vygotsky made a distinction between word sense and word meaning in discussing inner speech. The sense of a word is contextualized and it assimilates into an entire situation. "Word sense is highly idiosyncratic to the extent that lexical units acquire nuances and merge with others so that new meanings arise within a speaker"(Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 14). Thus, the semantic structure of inner speech is characterized by new information and does not need the grammatical and syntactic forms that are essential in the overt dialogue. The peculiarities of grammar and syntax of inner speech indicates that communicative speech-for-others is transformed into individualized speech -for-oneself (Kozulin, 1986; 1998). In contrast, word meaning is more stable and decontextualized and reflects generalized concept.

After egocentric speech is transformed into inner speech and goes underground, it can resurface as private speech when a child encounters a more difficult task and attempts to gain control over that task. This perspective is also applied to an adult; that is, he is not a finalized knower. He may be found producing private speech in some difficult circumstances (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Kozulin, 1998; 1986).

Private speech has an influential role in mediation in language learning and is a tool to regulate thinking and helps learners seek solutions and move to self-regulation. Additionally, it plays a role as the indicator of the learners' ZPD. The emerging of private speech in a particular task indicates that the task is nearly beyond learners' development level. However, if learners are able to regain control over the task through their private speech, the task is still within the development level. Then, a more difficult task can be expected. On the contrary, if learners' manifestation of their private speech fails to help them, it means that the task is beyond their development level and may be beyond their ZPD (McCafferty, 1994). The teacher should provide them with help.

The notion of inner speech and private speech is adopted and applied by SL and FL researchers in their studies. De Guerrero (1994), in her study, found evidence of the multifunctional roles of inner speech during mental rehearsal of a second language. She concluded that inner speech has 8 functional roles: the ideational role (in its thought-clarifying function), the mnemonic role, the semantic memorization role, instructional function, the



self-evaluation function, the inter-and intrapersonal role, and the affective role. These roles help learners get control of the task.

In his study, McCafferty (1994) found that there is a relationship between L2 proficiency level and the use of private speech. The greater use of forms of self-regulation indicates that learners use less private speech. That is, with the increased proficiency, learners “use of private speech diminished. This finding provides”evidence for a link to Vygotsky's ideas

concerning the mediational function of private speech in the process of self-regulation as applied to L2 learning.

These three major themes of sociocultural theory are the paths that lead us to witness a new perspective of learning and instruction in SL and FL classrooms. Also, they provide us with theoretical frameworks to better understanding and analyzing the dynamics of classroom instruction.

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