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THE OF Mediational Role IN Language Teachers Sociocultural Theory

I N RECENT YEARS, LANGUAGE EDUCATORS HAVE BECOME INTERESTED IN SOCIO-cultural theory and its application to language teaching and learning. Sociocultural theory was first developed and systematized by Vygotsky (1896–1934) and his collaborators in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, and has been embraced by theorists across the disciplines of psychology, education, and language acquisition. Vygotsky conceptualized cognitive development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes. In this sense, knowledge only has significance and value in the context of joint action and interaction. Donato and McCormick (1994:453) point out that "Sociocultural theory maintains that social interaction and cultural institutions, such as schools and classrooms, have important roles to play in an individual's cognitive growth and development."

Sociocultural theory is based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts and are mediated by language and other symbol systems. It emphasizes the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge. According to Lantolf (2000a:79), "Sociocultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture and with the specific experiences we have with the artifacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries."

One of the factors that has drawn language educators to sociocultural theory is its emphasis on mediation in the process of learning. In this article, I explain the mediational role of teachers in sociocultural theory.

Mediation

According to the Vygotskian view, it is through social mediation that knowledge becomes refined and viable and gains coherence. Mediation is the mechanism through which external, socio-cultural activities are transformed into internal, mental functioning. Mediation is the instrument of cognitive change (Kozulin 1990). The source of mediation can be either a material tool (for example, a string around one's finger as a reminder or a computer); a system of symbols (most notably language), or the behaviour of another human being in social interaction. Mediators, in the form of objects, symbols, and persons transform natural, spontaneous impulses into higher mental processes, including strategic orientations to problem solving. In the case of language learning, this mediation can take the form of a textbook, visual material, classroom discourse, opportunities for second language interaction, instruction, or other kinds of teacher assistance. Social mediation in the form of interaction can occur as expert-novice mediation (the teacher or more capable peers as "experts") or as peer mediation.

Ashton (1996) points out that in Vygotsky's view of mediation, human thought emerges in the context of activities that are embedded in specific social and cultural settings. Written and oral communication will be shaped by the styles of discourse that are preferred in the particular setting where the communication occurs. Applying this idea to the classroom, mediation includes teaching and learning aids; it can be spoken and written language, both of which are important for constructing knowledge and cognitive development. Learners' thinking will be shaped to the preferred discourse that dominates classroom interaction.

The mediational role of the language teacher does not simply mean that there is additional work required of the teacher, but that the teacher takes on a qualitatively different role. Rather than just follow curriculum guidelines or focus solely on the sequential acquisition of skills by learners, the teacher in the mediational role engages in a joint effort with learners, mainly through interaction, to advance the learners' development.

The ZPD and the mediational role of teachers

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a central concept in sociocultural theory that embraces the mediational roles of teachers. Vygotsky defines 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" (1978:86).

The concept is so crucial to pedagogy that there have been a variety of interpretations of learning and teaching derived from it. The original meaning of "adult guidance" was interpreted as the teacher's guidance in the classroom. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) use the metaphor of *scaffolding* to describe the graduated assistance provided to the novice by the teacher so that the novice can internalise external knowledge and convert it into tools of conscious control in order to accomplish learning tasks.

In language education, teaching in the zone of proximal development has been interpreted as providing guided assistance (scaffolding) and meaningful interaction. According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), teaching in the ZPD is *assisted performance,* that is, teachers provide the assistance necessary to bring the learner to a higher level through the zone and to a greater independent capacity. Lantolf (2000b:50) states, "Vygotsky's definition states that the ZPD is the difference between what a person

can accomplish when acting alone and what the same person can accomplish when acting with support from someone else and/or cultural artifacts."

The excerpt below from Takahashi (1998, cited in Lantolf 2000b:50) illustrates how scaffolding, teacher-student interaction, and student-student interaction operate as assisted performance. The lesson is about using the verb *want*. The teacher is assisting Mary to describe a picture using the verb *want* by using instructional language, interaction with other students, and the song as mediating tools to help Mary figure out how to use the verb correctly. At first Mary cannot complete the sentence (line 04). The prompting from the teacher and other classmates (lines 05 to 12), including the song, help Mary to make a correct sentence at last (line 13). The teacher understands that Mary cannot produce the sentence by herself, so the teacher uses the classroom interaction to mediate the thinking process in Mary. Mary "co-constructs" her understanding of the grammar point with the interaction of the teacher and her classmates.

To summarize, sociocultural theory emphasizes co-construction and collaboration; both are characteristics of goal-oriented interaction. The concept of working in the zone of proximal development, or "scaffolding," provides a good orientation to understanding teacher-learner interaction during which the mediational role of the teachers contributes to the learning and cognitive development of the learner(s).

Sociocultural theory and its contribution to language teaching approaches

Sociocultural theory holds a strongly interactionist view of language learning. There is a difference, however, between the sociocultural perspective and other perspectives that also view interaction as important in second language acquisition. The sociocultural theorists assume that language acquisition takes place in the interactions between learner and interlocutor. Other interactionist models assume input modification provides learners with the linguistic raw material that they will then process internally and invisibly (Lightbown and Spada 1999:44). In the other interactionist view, language input must be modified and comprehensible, and during the process of interaction, there is negotiation of meaning. The role of the teacher in sociocultural per-

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The teacher shows a picture of a boy eating an apple.

01	Teacher	Yes…
02	Student 1	Dennis is eating an apple.
03	Teacher	Dennis is eating an apple. Very good. Mary? *(Mary is Student 2)*

The teacher shows a picture of a boy who is thinking about eating an apple.

04	Student 2	Dennis eat apple.
05	Teacher	Eat? (with rising intonation)
06	Student 2	Is eating.
07	Student 3	(to S2) Wants to eat. Is eating. Does not eat.
08	Teacher	Remember this song? Want, want, want.

The teacher begins singing the "I want" song, and the students begin singing along with the teacher.

| 09 | Everyone | (singing) Wants, wants, wants. |

The children and teacher continue to sing the song with forms of want.

10	Teacher	Yes, wants to eat! Right? Wants to eat.
11	Students	Wants to eat.
12	Teacher	Wants to eat, yes, Mary?
13	Student 2	Dennis wants to eat an apple.
14	Teacher	Yes, very good!

(from Takahashi 1998, cited in Lantolf 2000b:50)

spectives goes beyond providing a rich language environment to learners. The teacher uses the language as a cognitive tool to enable learners to develop thoughts and ideas in language. The thinking process indicates development in learners, who become independent and capable of completing tasks as they reach their potential level of development.

The ZPD is similar to Krashen's (1981) input hypothesis in terms of language input. However, for teaching language in the ZPD, teachers must pay attention not only to language input but also to language learners (Lantolf 2000a:80), because they have to provide the learners with a supportive and guiding environment in addition to knowledge that is beyond the learners' current level. Meaning is constructed through joint activity rather than transmitted from teacher to learner. The teachers do not transfer knowledge to learners, but instead help learners to transform the knowledge they receive through the construction of meaning and with resources such as knowledge from interlocutors, textbooks, and other means available in the classroom context. Talk between the teacher and learners has a mediational role, which leads to further learning, so language becomes the primary mediational tool for constructing meaning.

According to Zou (1998), in teaching a second or foreign language, the use of the ZPD requires not only an awareness of the relationship between language, thought, and culture, but also knowledge of appropriate pedagogical principles. English learners have to explore a new system of language and culture. In this sense, teachers must provide competent support, guidance, and scaffolding, so students are empowered to study the target language effectively. Individual students are viewed as capable learners but in need of directed forms of assistance in order to succeed.

Sociocultural theory has been criticized for its strong emphasis on social interaction. Due to the focus on teacher-student interaction, other factors in the process of learning may be overlooked. Placing too much emphasis on the more capable learners or the teacher might deny the individual roles of all learners. Fox (2001:30) criticizes the concept of shared learning:

"To focus on teaching as the shared construction of knowledge… risks ignoring the extent to which learning depends on independent practice and problem-solving. It tends to highlight learning as conceptualisation and to ignore learning as the formation, or revision, of skills…. As well as sharing knowledge, we have to make knowledge our own."

Furthermore, sociocultural theory has also been criticized for its failure to pinpoint learner motivation and its de-emphasis on practice and experiential learning.

Conclusion

To summarize the Vygotskian pedagogy, teachers co-construct knowledge with learners. Teachers use the mediating tool of language to assist learners and that learners use to understand and internalise new knowledge. This internalisation leads to the individual's cognitive and linguistic development.

The contribution of sociocultural theory to language teaching is primarily its emphasis on language and other symbol systems as mediating tools for cognitive development in learning a new language. Teaching in the sociocultural perspective means assisting and guiding learners to do what they are not able to do alone, recognizing the interdependence of teacher and learner in the co-construction of knowledge, and seeing teachers as mediators in the learning process. To teach language through the mediating process means to instruct with guidance and through dialogic communication (Vygotsky 1962, 1978). Learning is appropriating knowledge through interaction. The learners are active constructors of their own learning environment, and the outcomes of the learning process are new zones of proximal development.

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