Sociocultural Theory Revisited: What are the Educational Implications?

Mehrdad Rezaee
Azad University, Tehran, Central Branch, Faculty of Foreign Languages
mehr351@yahoo.com

Abstract

Until recently, it was believed that to learn/teach another language, it is sufficient for a person to know the grammar of another language in detail, have a good command of its vocabulary, and be able to pronounce the words, phrases and sentences well. However, later it turned out not to be so easy since more important issues were discovered which made the learning/teaching of another language (SL/FL) more challenging than what it was previously thought. These issues are the social and the cultural aspects of L2/FL, the combination of which makes the sociocultural aspects of language learning and teaching. This means that, the circumstances under which we live, together with the symbols, symbolic tools, and signs we use to mediate and regulate our relationships with others, and with ourselves which make sociocultural theory are important issues for learning L2/FL. Later, the three generations of psycholinguistics are provided, the third generation of which is sociocultural theory together with the important notions of each generation. Finally, three educational implications of sociocultural theory are provided.

Keywords: Sociocultural theory; Education; L2 learning; Symbolic tools

1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theorists and practitioners of ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) showed more willingness to view L2/FL learning from the perspective of formal qualities of language. As a result, more attention was paid to the teaching and learning processes of the grammar and pronunciation of the FL/SL (Zhang, 2006). Although great amount of research had been done in those two decades, its major focus was on methodology and less emphasis was put on other important factors that influenced the final outcome of second or foreign language study, such as language distance, learners' diversity and cultural difference. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, research in this area began to shift its emphasis to learning process and learning style.

Meanwhile, Zhang (2006) proceeds that, in the process of learning a second or foreign language, without a doubt, learners will encounter internal and external obstacles. Internal factors involve personality, self-esteem or personal attitude while external ones refer to all social and cultural conditions associated with the entire environment in which language study takes place. Like those that constrain the acquisition of knowledge in any academic arena, internal and external elements also play a pivotal role in deciding the final outcome of the second or foreign language study. These internal and external elements come to be know in a more general term as sociocultural theory. But, what is it and how does it work?

2. Sociocultural Theory

According to Scott & Palinscar (2009), "The work of *sociocultural theory* is to explain how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context; hence, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities play in influencing psychological development." (p. 1).

3. Definition of Sociocultural Theory

Although sociocultural theory has been defined with different wordings and in different ways by different scholars, almost all of them (Bernard & Campbell's, 2005; Lantolf, 2006; Menezes, 2009) have considered two fundamental 'social' and the 'cultural' concepts in their definitions. Of course, some other scholars have also emphasized terms such as 'Cooperative learning' and

'Assistance' (Scott & Palinscar, 2009), 'Collaboration' (Mitchell and Myles, 2004), 'Interaction with others' and 'Intra-mental processes' (Cross & Gearon, 2004), 'Integration into a community of practice' and 'Enculturation' (Jaworski, 1996), 'Cultural artifacts' (Lantolf and Thorne, 2007), 'Speech community' and 'Co-construction' (Lantolf, 2005), 'Tools for thinking', 'Intra-mental tools', (Renshaw, 1992), 'Social practice', (Singh & Richards, 2006), and 'Social conventions' (Sultana, 2003). Nevertheless, the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated (Lantolf, 2006). That is, "We use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships with our mind" (Latolf, 2006, p.74). In fact, this is a reformulation of what Vygotsky (1987) argued when he said "Just as humans do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world, and with it, the circumstances under which will live in the world, they use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between themselves and the world." (p. 9)

The task of psychology, in Vygotsky's view, is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized through culturally constructed artifacts. Sociocultural domain, concerned with how the different types of symbolic tools developed by human cultures throughout the course of their respective histories affected the kinds of mediation favored, and with it the kinds of thinking valued by these cultures.

4. Sociocultural Theory: The Third Generation of Psycholinguistics

Whatever stated so far has considered Sociocultural Theory a social and communicative issue and something which deals with the interactional aspects of language learning and teaching. Put another way, from what went on, one can conclude that in order to learn a language well, there must be a real interaction or communication between a person and others. However, SCT is not merely a social issue. It can be studied from a psycholinguistic perspective, too. In fact, SCT is the third generation of psycholinguistics. That is, looking at the issue of SCT from a psycholinguistic viewpoint, one can say according to Leontiev (1981), that, at the beginning of its history in the early 1950s, psycholinguistics was a neobehaviorist discipline interested in the acquisition and processing of discrete units of language (e.g., words). The second generation of psycholinguistics that emerged in the early 1960s, with Chomsky's rise to preeminence in linguistics coupled with George Miller's psychological perspective, overcame the atomism of the first generation through its claim that what is acquired are abstract rules rather than discrete units (Leontiev, 1981). Consequently, researchers focused on perception and production of sentences, and occasionally on formal cohesive devises that link sentences into texts. Although Leontiev sees the second generation as representing progress, he nevertheless argues that its orientation was more linguistic than psychological (p. 93). Moreover, it shared the same interest in formal properties of language as manifested by its predecessor. Neither of the first two generations paid much attention to meaning; neither were they concerned with how language was actually deployed as a tool for communication or for thinking. To be sure, both generations studied the individual, but as an entity "isolated not only from society but also from any real process of communication, as such communication is reduced to the most elementary model of information transfer from speaker to listener" (p. 92). The third generation of psycholinguistics, according to Leontiev (1981, p. 95), is less linguistic and more psychological in orientation and has moved away from interest in the processing and perception of sentences and texts and "towards a psychological analysis of the processes of communication and thought" (p. 96). For the third generation, "psycholinguistics does not deal with the process of actualizing psychological structures which serve 'speech behavior' in the linguistic product, but explores the different strategies for using language (as a means) in activity" (p. 96). This activity may be aimed at influencing others or at influencing the self. When aimed at others, the activity is communicative; when aimed at the self, it is cognitive. Importantly, however, the two activities, as Vygotsky (1987) argued, are dialectically and therefore necessarily connected to each other in their genesis. That is, the activity of self-directed speaking is derived from the activity of other-directed speaking: in essence, both are forms of communication. In the first case, the interlocutors are I and you, and in

the second, I and me. In giving precedence to communicative activity over the acquisition and processing of abstract linguistic rules and representations, the third generation is interested in how speaking (and writing) mediates the concrete social and mental activity of human beings. Thus, speaking activity is "motivated and purposive. It represents a process of solving communicative problems" (Leontiev, 1981, p. 97), and these problems can be social as well as cognitive. Seen from this perspective, the learning and teaching of another language is not about learning and teaching rules and forms but about communication as a means of mediating "distinct types of intellectual and practical [i.e., social] activity" (p. 99).

Thus, the central proposition of SCT is that humans are fundamentally communicatively organized beings. This notion extends not only to the world of social relationships but also to the world of higher mental functions. Just as our social activity is mediated through speech, so too is our mental activity. Specifically, through speaking (and writing), we are able to gain control over our memory, attention, planning, perception, learning, and development, but this control is derived from the social activity we engage in not only with our contemporaries but also with those who have preceded us in time through the cultural artifacts, including language, they have created and left behind.

5. The Educational Implications of Sociocultural Theory

Given the comprehensive nature of sociocultural theory, its educational implications for assessment, curriculum, and instruction are broad-ranging, and only a glimpse of them can be provided in this entry. For example, according to Scott & Palinscar (2009, p. 5), "sociocultural theory—in particular the notion of zone of proximal development—would suggest that the goals of educational assessment should be to: (a) identify abilities that are in the process of developing, and (b) attempt to predict what the learner will do independently in the future. A line of inquiry consistent with these assessment goals is *dynamic assessment*.". To put it in a nutshell, Scott & Palinscar (2009, p. 6) state that, SCT has three major educational implications.

5. 1. Instructional Implications

Informed by a socio-cultural perspective, learning is thought to occur through interaction, negotiation, and collaboration. While these features are characteristic of "cooperative learning," what sets instruction, which is informed by sociocultural theory, apart is that there is also attention to the discourse, norms, and practices associated with particular discourse and practice communities. The goal of instruction is to support students to engage in the activities, talks, and use of tools in a manner that is consistent with the practices of the community to which students are being introduced (e.g., scientists, mathematicians, historians).

5.2. Use of New Technologies

With the proliferation of information and communication technologies in educational and everyday settings, scholars, working from a socio-cultural perspective, are working to expand concepts, such as distributed cognition, to include not only people and artifacts, but also digital technologies. For example, Shaffer and Clinton (2006) introduce a new category of tool, which they call, tool for thoughts and, in doing so, challenge the idea that humans occupy a privileged position in psychological analyses. They argue that media, such as video games, word processors, and analytical tools create new skills and habits of mind, in addition to shifting the focus from reading and writing the printed word to multimodal literacy.

5.3. Research Applied to Institutional Settings

Research conducted from a socio-cultural perspective has focused traditionally on the interactions of individuals and groups of individuals. However, research has also applied this lens to much larger institutional settings. For example, Cobb and McClain (2006) illustrate how efforts

toward a mathematics reform effort need to be analyzed at a teacher, classroom, school, district, and indeed state and federal policy levels, to provide a more complete accounting of the reform effort.

6. Conclusion

From what was said, one can understand that in order to learn/teach another language, although it is necessary to learn/teach the grammar and vocabulary of that language, and also have a good pronunciation when speaking in that language, this is never sufficient because there are other very important things such as the social and cultural aspects of language learning and teaching which play vital roles in the learning/teaching process of a SL/FL. In other words, one must know the meaning of different symbols, symbolic tools and signs in a language (as they might be completely different from one language to the other) in order not to face problems in communication with other people from that language. There are social or cultural aspects in one language which might be completely different or totally opposite that of the things in one's own language or even absent in one's own language. Therefore, neglecting them can be sometime funny, causing misunderstanding, at other times, problematic, bringing about troubles for the speaker, and still at other times, very much hazardous in communication with someone else, leading to bloody fights between the two speakers.

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