

The Sociocultural Model: Mediation and English Language Teaching at the Tertiary Level

Zakia Ahmad*

Abstract: The sociocultural theory has been largely influenced by the Russian psychologist, Lev S. Vygotsky's research and findings of the role of interaction in the development of children and the workings of the human mind. This paper starts with an outline of Vygotsky's theory which is the basis of and crucial to the understanding of the theory. It draws on all the tenets of Vygotsky's theory which have formed the basis of sociocultural theory in the field of education in the recent years. The paper then moves on to analyse how the concept of 'mediation' has been adopted to second language learning and teaching with reference to some recent studies undertaken in the field. Suggestions have been made as to how this concept can be useful for teaching English to tertiary level students at private universities.

Introduction: The Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory (henceforth SCT) is a theory of teaching and learning. The concepts which are fundamental to the theory have been applied to the learning and teaching of languages, and research (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf 2006) has been carried out to examine the validity of the concepts. The role of mediation has been considered a key factor in the process of learning. A theory tries to explain certain phenomena and how they interact; it is a set of claims about the units or factors under study, it studies the relationship between the units and what causes the processes to change and alter (Larsen-Freeman 1991; Mitchell and Myles 2004). The SCT claims learning is mediated thus we can study the SCT from the perspective of how it has influenced second language learning through its basic tenets of social interaction and mediation.

Central to the SCT are the claims and findings made by Vygotsky. The theory derives its basic tenets from the social historical theory of Vygotsky who worked on child development and psychology in the first quarter of the 20th century but it was not until 1962 that his book *Thought and Language* was translated and published in English. The research, theories and findings of the Russian psychologist were grounded in child development and psychology. In recent years research and study into the process of language learning, teaching and education has incorporated these factors into the sociocultural theory of learning

* Zakia Ahmed, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Dhaka

and teaching. Thus in trying to understand the tenets of the sociocultural theory we have to examine the basic points made by Vygotsky and his fellow workers. The foundations of the sociocultural theory are based on their research and findings. Sociocultural theory investigates the cognitive, mental and intellectual changes that take place within the individual through cultural interactions. Vygotsky was inspired by the Swiss researcher Jean Piaget but differed from him in his theoretical stances. The difference between Piaget's and Vygotsky's assumptions is that according to Piaget a child's learning and development was 'egocentric'. As a child becomes progressively social his egocentric speech disappears while Vygotsky claims that egocentric speech plays an important role in the regulation of action and continues to be part of the child's mental functioning on the internal level (Wertsch 1985). For Piaget social behaviour developed late in a child. Egocentric speech was more prevalent in a child in the process of development, as he matured this disappeared. Vygotsky compared Piaget's theory with his own. He says Piaget's observations led him to conclude that all conversations of children fall into two groups, the egocentric and the socialized. "The child talks to himself as though he were thinking aloud. He does not address anyone" (Piaget cited in Vygotsky 1986). As opposed to this view is Vygotsky's claim that the child's development was mediated through social interaction. He said that development took place through interaction with the physical world and "verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour, but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech" (Vygotsky 1986: 94). Mitchell and Myles (2004: 197-198) project the process of human development as proposed by Vygotsky taking place through three genetic domains, these are:

Phylogenesis: the historical process of learning coming down through generations.

Ontogenesis: learning which takes place in infants.

Microgenesis: learning and development which is acquired through social interaction.

The sociocultural approach studies interaction between human mental activity and the social situation in which this takes place (Wertsch 1995). The psychological functions appear twice in a human being: once on the social plane between people and then within the individual, so learning at first is interpersonal and then intrapersonal or intermental and then intramental. Central to Vygotsky's approach was the effort to show that "the individual and the social were conceived of as mutually constitutive elements of a single, interacting system; cognitive development was treated as a process of acquiring culture" (Cole 1985).

According to Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Psychology human development progresses historically, is culturally mediated and is realized through practical activity (Cole 1996).

Cultural and historical beliefs are handed on from one generation to another through parents, teachers and adults. Learning takes place through interaction and is always mediated by tools. Thus for Vygotsky the child first learned through its interactions with others i.e. socially and when this learning was 'internalised' it learned to function individually. "Inner speech is considered to be an important factor in the transition from thought to external speech" (Vygotsky 1986). All learning according to him is mediated through socially constructed artifacts, such as, signs, symbols and tools and one of the basic tools of human interaction is language. Without mediation learning could not take place. Language worked as a tool for mediating a child's learning and cognitive development. Luria along with his fellow-workers "considered language to be an integral part of the overall process of cultural mediation, the tool of tools" (Cole 1996).

Another important concept in Vygotsky's theory was that of self-regulation and other regulation. A child becomes self-regulated only after receiving other-regulation, which is support from adults or peers. "With assistance every child can do more than he can by himself – though only within the limits set by the state of his development (Vygotsky 1986).

This gives rise to Vygotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development'. Vygotsky believed social interaction was mediated by psychological tools and then internalized. Speech was a primary psychological tool for Vygotsky which mediated the mental processes, so tools had a social as well as an internal function. We see how the acquisition of L1 and L2 takes place through mediation of these tools in the zone of proximal development.

Zone of Proximal Development

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a Vygotskian concept which has been used to explain the learning processes which take place in an individual. This concept has played an important part in neo-Vygotskian thinking. Vygotsky (1986) states "the discrepancy between a child's actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance indicates the zone of his proximal development." It is the level of development reached by the child through assistance from adults, parents, teacher or more competent peers. He "formulated the ZPD as a way of capturing the dynamic interactions humans have with their environment and how this brings about development" (Lantolf and Poehner 2008: 14). In summing up his views of the zone of proximal development and SCT among the many points he makes one is that "the acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviour is a process of interaction between children and adults, in which adults guide children's behaviour as an essential element in concept

acquisition/acclimation/education" (Cole 1985). These views show us how this concept becomes an essential element of the SCT. Researchers working on the processes of L2 learning and teaching have found the concept of the ZPD to be very relevant and effective. Edwards and Mercer (1987: 23) cite Bruner's summary of the ZPD as

When the child achieves that conscious control over a new function or conceptual system, it is then that he is able to use it as a tool. Up to that point, the tutor in effect performs the critical function of 'scaffolding' the learning task to make it possible for the child, that is, in Vygotsky's word, to internalize external knowledge and convert it into a tool for conscious control.

The child is at first self regulated then with support, guidance and assistance i.e. other-regulation, acquires new knowledge. There is a movement from interpersonal to intrapersonal activity. The metaphor '*scaffolding*' was coined (Wood 2005: 99) to explain this support that children needed. "The process of supportive dialogue which directs the attention of the learner to the key factors of the environment, and which prompts them through successive steps of a problem, has come to be known as *scaffolding* (Wood et al., 1976, cited in Mitchell and Myles 1998: 145). Interaction between adults and children and between children and their peers provide this scaffolding. Emphasis is placed on the social aspect of human development and the mediating role of others in helping to build higher levels of understanding in the process of learning (Anderson 2008). Without assistance children's activity may lead nowhere. Formal social institutions and interactions with its members are central to the process of development and to understand cognitive development we have to pay attention to schooling, toys, instruction provided by adults and peers (Rogoff 1984). Experiment undertaken by Rogoff and Gardner (1984) has shown that in a mother-child interaction the child develops through instruction and reaches a stage where she can "participate in problem solving" on her own. Scaffolding in the form of the teacher's or adult's selective intervention works as a tool increasing the range of the pupil's level of learning, supporting him and aiding him when necessary (Greenfield 1984). Donato's (1994) study cited in Mitchell and Myles, (2004) shows how adult English L1 learners achieve linguistic forms through peer scaffolding. Forman and Cazden (1985) also cite investigations undertaken by Russian and Japanese researchers which provide results of superior intellectual abilities acquired through peer interaction.

But again too much scaffolding will make a child "unable to function independently or outside the precise context and content of what was done in the classroom" (Edwards and Mercer 1987: 167). The teacher, guide or parent must know when to withdraw and let the child function on his own intramental level.

Studies in SLA carried out from a sociocultural context try to determine how learning is mediated through interaction and assistance in the ZPD.

Activity Theory

Activity theory is an outcome of social, cultural and historical processes in which the human mind is mediated for cognitive development and enhancement. Activity theory as relevant to the field of sociocultural theory and research has been introduced by Leont'ev in the Vygotskian tradition. Individual learning takes place in social context and it is realized through activities. From a Vygotskian perspective knowledge comes through social interaction. Y. Engestrom (2001) as cited in Lantolf and Thorne (2006) shows the evolution of activity theory through three generations – the first is the Vygotskian tradition, the second through the works of Leont'ev and the third he says is still in progress. Activity according to Leont'ev is either biologically or culturally motivated (Lantolf 2000). Individual cognitive development is mediated through socially constructed artifacts and social interaction. Mediation takes place through different activities. Vygotskian psychologists considered play, instruction, education, work all to be forms of activity (Wertsch, Minick and Arns 1984). From a sociocultural Vygotskian perspective play is extremely important because it creates a social setting where the individual can interact and develop, it is more open ended and conducive to learning (Lee 1985; Schaffer 1996).

Individuals go through a process of change as they participate in an activity and this prepares them for the next activities, they relate to each other through their interactions in society (Rogoff 1995; Wertsch 1995). Recent trends in sociocultural theory have shown that in activity language is a basic tool and it is through this semiotic mediation that activities are realized – both socially and cognitively. The teacher's responsibility is to create proper forms of educational activity within a social context for the student to assimilate knowledge (Daniels 1993). Mediation which is provided in carrying out activities leads to higher mental processes or internalization. In the context of SLA mediation may be provided through interaction and any type of scaffolding within the ZPD.

Mediation

"The most fundamental concept of the sociocultural theory is that the human mind is *mediated*" (Lantolf 2000). Lantolf's assertion is based on the studies of Vygotsky which propound that all human activity is mediated through tools or artifacts which can be either physical, material or symbolic (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 19). Cole (1996) talks about how the Russian psychologists viewed the relationship which existed between the individual and the environment. This is like a triangular relationship with subject, object and artifact at the three points.

Figure 1 (Lantolf and Thorne 2006:62) gives a graphic representation of Vygotsky's concept of mediation. The relationship that exists between human beings and the world is both direct and indirect as shown by the solid and the dotted lines. It is direct because of the fact that like all animals humans have reflexes and automated responses in their interactions with the world. But the indirect relationship is one which only humans have and this is mediated through artifacts, concepts and activities. Connection between the physical or social world and the mental world, subject and object is made through these artifacts.

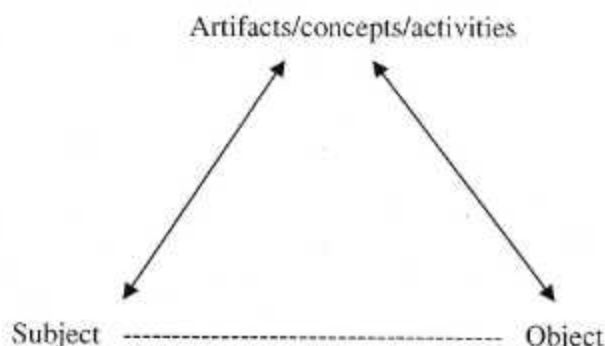


Figure 1 (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)

Language is a prime symbolic tool through which humans mediate their interactions in the social world – interactions with each other and within themselves. Mediation occurs first interpersonally and then intrapersonally through artifacts which lead to higher mental activities. Studies in second language learning and teaching have tried to investigate how mediation occurs and helps to internalize language acquisition. The basic tenets of the SCT which are relevant for L2 learning are: mediation in the learners' ZPD, mediation through artifacts/tools /symbols and interaction and activity as mediation.

Mediation and SLA

The importance of the concept of mediation has been increasing in the field of SCT and second language acquisition. Vygotsky working with child development and pedagogy believed higher mental processes were mediated through social cultural interaction and education, he emphasized the role of language in literacy development and education (Dixon-Krauss 1996). Researchers have also argued that "second language acquisition takes place through conversational interaction" (Lightbown and Spada 2000). Mediation and interaction are crucial to language learning. This has become an extremely important arena for research in SLA from the point of view of SCT. Bruner (1985) contends that in Vygotsky's view language and action come together and gradually action is represented by words, the process of dialogue is introduced and language is internalized.

The analysis of some important empirical studies which have been carried out keeping the basic tenets of the sociocultural theory in perspective, namely, mediation through social interaction, activity, negative and feedback, error correction and dialogic interactions.

"The Discourse of a Learner-Centered Classroom: Sociocultural Perspectives on Teacher-Learner Interaction in the Second Language Classroom" undertaken by Anton (1999) investigates and compares two types of L2 classroom discourse: teacher-centered and learner-centered. The researcher claims that learner-centered discourse creates a favourable setting for L2 acquisition. She analyses the classroom discourse from the perspective of interaction and discourse mediating language development and hence cognitive development. The concept of scaffolding is also used to show the learners' development in the ZPD. This draws on Vygotsky's concepts of SCT.

Anton's main argument is that "teachers can engage learners in the negotiation of meaning, language forms, and classroom rules by using various discursive moves, and in so doing can also promote learners' active mental participation, which may have a role in L2 learning" (310). She studies teacher-student interaction from the perspective of the SCT, stating that this theory provides an ideal setting for analyzing interactive classrooms to see how cognitive development and language learning is mediated through social interaction. She draws on Vygotsky's concept of (i) learning taking place first on the interpsychological plane and then on the intrapsychological plane, (ii) human action being mediated by tools, and (iii) social functions transforming into higher mental functions within the ZPD. Higher cognitive processes emerge through interaction (Lantolf and Appel, 1994, cited in Anton, 1999). The study concludes stating the importance of teacher-learner interaction for enhancing L2 learning. Learners acquire "negotiation of meaning, linguistic forms and rules for classroom behaviour" (Anton 1999) through interaction.

Richard Donato and Dawn McCormick's (1994) 'A Sociocultural Perspective on Language Learning Strategies: The Role of Mediation' is an empirical study to examine the process of mediation through different learning strategies, namely maintaining and assessment of portfolio and being reflective about the process of learning. Within the sociocultural context the portfolio took on the role of mediator. The researchers state that the SCT provides a framework for understanding "how learners become competent members of a language learning community" (Donato and McCormick 1994). The study emphasizes the sociocultural aspect which maintains that strategies develop as learners participate in cultural groups and become competent members of the learning community. The classroom was conceptualized as a dynamic culture and classroom instruction was studied to examine its effect on the learners' language learning strategies. The sociocultural concept of culture, society and context

comes in here. The classroom is a social arena where learners through participation achieve new "values, beliefs and behaviours" (Donato and McCormick 1994). Learners' participation in the classroom is viewed as socially interactive participation.

The study has added a new dimension to the SCT. Based on the tenets of SCT, giving prime importance to mediation the researchers have moved on to a new level of interaction, i.e. the portfolio as mediator. The use of the portfolio gave the students time to reflect and become more active learners. They could look back on their work and comments and move on to a higher level, this of course took place through interaction with the teacher. The use of the portfolio provided support and mediated learning in the learners ZPD with assistance from the teacher. The students could use their own reflections to mediate their learning and thus move on to a higher intramental level.

SLA studies conducted from the sociocultural perspective have investigated the importance of mediation in second language learning (Lantolf 2006). Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) contend development in L2 takes place in ZPD with negotiated help and proper feedback. Negative feedback, error correction, dialogic interactions mediates second language learning. Swain and Lapkin (1998) studied two French immersion students use of dialogue for communication and also as a cognitive tool. These learners used their L1 to mediate L2 learning and learning emerged through "collaborative dialogue." Negotiated help within the learner's ZPD, corrective feedback rather than negative feedback makes L2 learning more effective (Nassaji and Swain 2000). Guk and Kellogg (2007) studied L2 learning in a classroom setting as they argue Vygotsky was concerned with public schooling and not one to one teaching. Their study revealed teacher-student interaction to be more intermental and student-student interaction more intramental. These studies show SLA being mediated through different tools.

Mediation and English Language Teaching at the Tertiary Level

Suggestions are made as to how this concept can be useful for teaching English to tertiary level students at private universities. It has been found that the English proficiency level of students at the tertiary level is so low they are unable to pursue their higher studies without further improvement of this language. Students mostly come from backgrounds where English exposure is minimum. This being one of the many reasons for their low proficiency in English. English has been introduced at the tertiary level of studies at all public and private universities of the country to help students overcome this difficulty. I am specifically suggesting that teachers become aware of the concept of mediation for teaching English to these students at the private universities.

The reason I specifically mention private universities is that at these universities there are many factors which would facilitate Learning English as a second language through mediation. At these universities the English syllabus structure, modules to be completed by the students, number of terms English is taught and expected proficiency level of students after completing these courses is the same. In most of the private universities the size of classes is uniform and conducive for language teaching. This makes it possible for the teacher to monitor the classes, interact with the students and initiate their full participation. The prevalent mode of instruction in the ESL classes is the communicative language teaching approach. In using this approach the teacher can become the mediator through which learning becomes successful for students. Mediation can also occur while students work in groups and pairs. Language learning is a skill to be developed through practice. While practicing mediation can occur in the form of support from the instructor, peers, activities or other materials like a portfolio as seen in the study discussed above. Teacher's conscious use of these forms of mediation can help a student to analyse and acquire the language proficiently. The teacher herself works as mediator and also makes students use other scaffolding factors for language acquisition.

According to SCT psychological functioning extends beyond the individual to activities. Citing Leont'ev researchers (Donato and McCormick 1994) state that activity can have a subject, an object, actions and operations. In the context of language learning the learner can be the subject, the object is the goal or motivation that drives the learner to the goal and activity and operations are the activities leading towards achievement of the goals. All these three contribute to language learning. Vygotsky, whose theory laid the foundations of SCT claimed that "higher mental functions are generated in goal-directed, mediated activity" (Donato and McCormick 1994).

Keeping the empirical studies in mind if we think of our English teaching and learning situation we can see that the SCT can be very relevant here. The concept of mediation can be kept foremost in mind. The tenets on which SCT rests can be made operative in teaching English to tertiary students. Learning can be mediated through language, teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction and scaffolding. Teachers' collaborative assistance can provide scaffolding in the learners ZPD.

Conclusion

The three issues of SCT identified at the outset of this paper, namely: intermental and intramental learning, ZPD, and activity theory have been viewed in the papers discussed. These studies have shown the process of mediation in L2 acquisition from a sociocultural perspective. Learning is mediated through teacher-student, student-student interaction and activities. These provide

scaffolding in the learners' ZPD. In another study the use of portfolio helped the students to be reflective and mediated second language learning. The students reached a higher intramental level.

The study of L2 acquisition is a vast and complex field. These studies have shown that 'the human mind is *mediated*'. The sociocultural approach to language learning and teaching could take the teaching of L2 one step ahead of the CLT approach. Vygotsky was concerned with how teaching could be effective in schools. How the sociocultural approach might be adopted in large classrooms and how effective the teaching-learning situation will be from the Vygotskian and the sociocultural perspective is yet to be seen in a Bangladeshi context. Small scale studies have shown that learning is impacted upon by mediation, interaction, activity and assistance. It will be a challenge for linguists, researchers and language practitioners in our country to put these into operation in the world wide phenomena of L2 learning.

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