

“Impact and Implementation of Sociocultural Theory in ESL Classroom”

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Abstract

Sociocultural theory is a great theory for learning and for teaching the students. Moreover, it believes that learning L2 should be a helpful accomplishment not an unmediated process. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that, instruction and interaction is very crucial method for L2 development in ESL classroom and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) ensures learner's actual sociocultural growth. Therefore, this paper examines sociocultural theory in an ESL classroom and shows implementation of theories in practical teaching life.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Mediation

Chapter One

1. Introduction

Vygotsky is one of the finest psychologists who have created a great influence in the field of education. His sociocultural theory is an important concept for learning and teaching procedure. This theory also includes L2 or second language acquisition. Sociocultural theory emphasizes on giving instructions for L2 improvement or to develop L2 skills according to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development. However, Vygotsky's theory does not imply on those methods which could not be taught to a kid. Vygotsky (1962) stated in his theory that, if a teacher directly teach the concepts without explanation, then it will not be and fruitful. Here the teachers use repetition method, where child only memorize the things but does not learn anything. And this system creates emptiness in student's mind. (p 150). A child should be taught by some rules, instructions and accomplishments which is included in ZPD method. In addition, sociocultural theory comprises with cultural method as well as educational method. This theory is very beneficial for young learners because it teaches social interaction, cultural participation and all the components which is needed for an effective teaching environment. Along with the other criteria's teacher-talk and student-talk should be ensured also for an ESL based classroom. Most of the student prefers short, simple and easy instruction which is also a matter of concern. A teacher should be consistent to all the students. Teacher should use same set of words for the same instruction (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 40).

From my understanding, the work of sociocultural theory is to explain how an individual's mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. Therefore, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participate in social

interaction and culturally organized activities which influences psychological development. Moreover, for a teacher, the sociocultural setting of an ESL classroom should be planned according to problem solving, involve students into mental activity and influence them for logical thinking. To develop my paper, I will look for the relevant theories regarding sociocultural theory, how students can be motivated, how students can have interest in their learning process and what appears in their mind during interaction with teachers. Therefore, in my internship report, I will emphasis on the theories applied in ESL classroom during my internship period followed by some effective measures of sociocultural perspective of young learners and how an instructor should form the curriculum according to the needs of students.

Chapter Two

2. Literature review

2.1: Zone of Proximal Development -

Social interaction is a critical period for cognitive development. Because it is related to another idea of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). By interaction with students in a friendly way will produce effective results on their L2 learning process. In the meantime, language of a teacher plays a vital role for creating social interaction. This concept relates to the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what a child can achieve from guidance and encouragement from a capable partner. Vygotsky also founded the importance of social communication for human cognitive development and for human psychological capabilities “first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level, first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the learner (intrapsychological)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Aljaafreh & Lantolf also stated that, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has two foremost criteria-

- Cognitive development which focuses on cultural and social interaction and
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1994)

Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that, ZPD is the area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance should be given. The development of the child, which will use on their own development of higher mental functions, is based on ZPD method. According to Lev Vygotsky, children learn from interaction with others and from the surroundings. Society and their culture help the children to learn in a better way.

Vygotsky's theory put emphasis to the teacher's role. Teaching is that kind of profession which is totally about mentoring. Because from Vygotsky's perception, future of a learner's or a child's depends on proper supervision and for this reason he formulated Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where he describes, "the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Wertsch 1985, P. 60). For the instructor's guideline Warford (2011) describes Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as zone of proximal teacher development (ZPTD) where he explained that there are some differences between taking assistance and not taking assistance. Learners who goes through proximal development with the help of their instructor are seemed more capable than who try to do their work by own. (p.253). Some of the other researches also emphasizes on this issue, Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004) also gave definition on this issue. They defined two components- "ongoing engagement and reaction to challenge" (p-262). Ongoing engagement focuses on student's behavior, feeling, thought, emotions when they stays in school and includes them to concentrate, to innate, to interact with

peers and instructor, helps them to stay in task, helps to put efforts and give them opportunity to show their interest. On the other hand, reaction to challenge is that kind of engagement where learners intend to do copy, engage in deviant work, they fail to achieve their goals, cannot solve the problems, unable to use any strategic thinking etc. (Donato, 2000) also purported that learning language by impassive learners cannot be constructive. But those who are proactive and learn from the social environment (Wells, 1999, p. 140) can easily interact with the teachers or instructor and with his/her peers and can gain knowledge. (Mitchell & Myles 1998, p. 162). Nevertheless, “this process is asymmetrical and ZPD is evolving” (Yu, 2004, p. 6).

In Bangladeshi context, Students are devoted to L1 or mother tongue. Therefore, if a teacher tries or emphasizes L1 to teach L2 it will generate more emphasis on learners learning in an ESL classroom. Language is a medium which can develop social interaction and can enhance the higher level of knowledge and performance of the children. (Spada 2013, p- 20). Vygotsky noted that the process of social interaction varies from “individual to individual, and indeed, across time periods for specific individuals” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 266). Thus the skill which is performed with assistance is considered as individual ZPD.

2.2: Scaffolding

Scaffolding is another process which is used by the instructor for solving the problems of the learners and also supports their point of whenever they face difficulty in any task. According to Donato (1994), scaffolding is a theory that develops cognitive development of a learner. A learner who is knowledgeable enough to do social interaction can develop the cognitive skills, can extend his/ her intelligence and can reach to the top level of proficiency. If we talk about institutional perspective, then scaffolding is an instructional structure which is followed by the instructor and it is the most wanted learning strategy for them. However, this strategy

progressively shifts to the students. From McKenzie's point of view, scaffolding provides the following advantages:

- provides clear instructions for students
- simplifies purpose of the task
- keeps students on task
- offers assessment to clarify expectations
- points students to worthy sources
- reduces vagueness, disbelief and disappointment
- delivers productivity
- creates energy (1999)

For language learning Leo Van Lier (1996) has invented six components of scaffolding. They are-

- Contextual support –challenging atmosphere is needed for this kind of support. In this environment mistakes and errors are expected and accepted for teaching and learning language.
- Continuity – repeat same occurrences again and again for difficult actions and keep a stable position between routine and differences.
- Inter subjectivity – mutual participation and support required where two minds will work together and solve the task.
- Flow – interaction between students and teacher should not be done in a forcefully manner. Interaction should be done in a natural way and teacher should try to involve the students in fun learning activities.

- Contingency – scaffolding depends on how learners are taking the lessons. Therefore, from their responses, the components of learning process can be added, deleted, changed etc.
- Handover – Zone of proximal development stops when learners or students are ready to solve new projects or comparable tasks without help. (p. 196).

2.3: Mediation

Mediation is a central or similar idea to the sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's concept of learning language creates the path of social mediation which conducts social interaction and helps to learn L2. In addition, Mediation is a socially created movement which is connected with 'human to the world of objects or mental behavior' (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 418). Along with Lantolf and Appel, Wertsch (2007) mentioned that, Vygotsky emphasized that human's interaction should be mediated with physical or psychological tool and most importantly with the help of language. (p. 178). Furthermore, learning and language acquisition both are interactional process which can be mediated by a learner and by an instructor. According to Lantolf and Throne (2006), speaking and writing skills can be conducted as a "meditational tool" (p. 60). They also mentioned that, mediation is a special method which helps an instructor to be the specialist as class teacher (SCT) and also mental development are mediated from "culturally constructed auxiliary means." (p. 59).

Chapter 3

3. Implementation of Theories into practice-

I have worked as an intern teacher in a school named 'Little Jewels Nursery Infant and Junior School'. At this school I taught creative writing and English language for three months to gain practical knowledge about the learning process of the students. The ages of the students were 8 to 10 years old. Besides, I have also observed some Bangla medium classes to know the teaching system there. However, this internship period was my probation time where I have learnt how to handle students, how to make study interesting to them and how to interact with them. Furthermore, the main objective of the internship was to relate or to implement the learning of my undergrad life and how my learning worked in a real classroom location. In addition, my focus was also to implement socio-cultural perspective in a classroom scenario. Therefore, in this unit, I will focus on several phases of my teaching experience along with the related theories and methods of socio-cultural theory.

3.1: Class observation and preparation of lesson plans before teaching:

Generally I worked as a full time intern and took creative writing and language class of class 4 and 5. Sometimes I also taught grammar classes of class 2 and 3. As it was an English medium school and ESL classroom, it was quite a challenging task for me as a beginner. When I first joined the school, it took quite some time to understand the pattern of learners' learning process. After about one week I grabbed a general idea of the lesson plan. Though the lesson plans were not as appropriately drafted as compared to the university standards but the way my supervisor kept record of the lessons, is appreciable. I marked some symptoms of the students that, they were not excited, interested and motivated for the creative writing class, though it was quite interesting compared to many other subjects. Moreover, many were not interactive with the

teacher, which was the main principle of socio-cultural theory. It is said that, socio-cultural structure gives “dynamic interaction, interrelation and interconnection” (Ajayi 2008, p. 654) with teachers and this theory helps to do practice in such ways that learners could find their mistakes and behave enthusiastically. Besides, I observed that, instructor gave some sheets having scenery in it. Then he told the students to observe the picture thoroughly and write a story using L2 on their own words. He also mentioned that, the story should not exceed more than fifteen sentences. The instructor also gave a sample example, how they can process their writing which was impressive for me. But when I saw the students, they were looking quite confused with the instructions and instructor also did not try to check student’s understandings, whether they understood or not. I also found that, students of this class were quite shy and nervous in terms of asking questions or help. Actually, in Bangladeshi culture, students have some anxiety about the instructors. They often think they might get punished or scolded by their teacher for asking for help. In addition, without a strong and supportive social environment or interaction, probable learning process for the learners is impossible and their talents will also be damaged for such instruction procedure, as believed by (Nyikos and Hashimoto 1997, p. 516). Moreover, some of the students - back benchers, started to color the picture. It must be mentioned that, the instructor was not an angry person; he was well behaved but had the tendency to teach the students in rote learning method. Simister (2004) emphasizes on this matter that, repetition of recognized words or ideas will only produce dull, depressed and unimaginative learners and individual voice of students will also be underestimated. However, only few students could finish the story writing and the teacher appreciated them.

On the second week of my internship, I started taking classes. Before starting my teaching practice, I prepared some chits with some topics for their application writing. For example:

- Suppose you are **Murgi Melon** and studying at high school. You have a lovely sister name **Sokhina Shundori** and her wedding ceremony comes off soon. You need leave in advance for her marriage. Now write an application to your head teacher praying for leave in advance on the occasion of her wedding. (Don't miss the wedding ;))
- Imagine your name is **Mickey Mouse** and you are a student of Nurpur High school. You could not attend school for three days on account of cold and fever. Now, write an application on leave of absence.

I was a little bit nervous while giving such funny and hilarious names, wondering whether I could grab the attention of the students or not. However, when I was giving the idea of how to write an application, none of the students paid much attention, as they always experience these types of lectures. But when I gave away the chits by forming a lottery, I saw a cheerful mood appeared. Kozulin et al. (1995) claimed that, learning process is not an unsocial assessment, but it is a process where a child can relate their social environment, their culture with such interesting tools or exciting plays. Therefore, I saw each of the students was laughing by reading the topic of the application. I also have seen an enjoyment and excitement in their face and I made them free to ask me any kind of question regarding the task. My interaction with them was also helping them to speak in L2 without any nervousness. From Vygotsky's point of view, teaching is such a profession where teaching techniques should be interactive between the teacher and learners and this learning process could be done with some active process like

dialogues, questioning, rephrasing etc. (1978). After that, they comfortably started writing the application and whenever they were facing difficulty in terms of choosing words, meaning of the words and forming the sentences, I tried my best to help them. Teemant, Leland, and Berghoff (2014) witnessed that; English learner's need more care to acquire academic knowledge. They need comfortable surroundings with "hybrid identities, competent in reading power relations and challenging everyday assumptions, and agentive in the face of inequities. (p. 137)" In this ESL classroom, I let the students interact with their peers and with the teachers, I helped them to speak their own point, encouraged the trying of new vocabularies, tried to remove their anxiety of second language acquisition and involved them in such a way which might help to develop their socio-cultural perspective. As it is said by Swain & Lapkin, (2002) that, communication and writing skills are perceived from cognitive development which helps the learners distinguishing, conveying, re-socializing etc. moreover these are the "tools that construct and deconstruct and regulate knowledge" (p-181). Vygotsky (1978) also described understanding is a cultural process whereas learning is social and teaching is supporting the cultural and social facts In addition, learner's involvement in learning L2, thinking, knowing process have a connection with the activities and tasks, which appears from sociocultural development. (Lave and Wenger, p.67). Besides, before planning the task I focused on certain issues concerning students' participation and reward. Therefore, the methods which I applied for L2 acquisition and the social learning process were-

- Zone of proximal development,
- Mediation
- Scaffolding

Chapter 4

4. Recommendation

4.1: How to acquire sociocultural perspective in other ways:

Sociocultural view of a native student might not get the light or success, if schools don't implement Vygotsky's theory in a proper manner in an ESL classroom. The best way to implement Vygotsky's theory is through group work. Group work can be accomplished in several ways. For example-

- Peer to peer
- Parents/ family
- Community
- Face to face discussion
- Interactive task
- Individual

4.2: Peer to peer:

In peer to peer work, students can work in pairs or in small groups. These kinds of pairs or small groups give the opportunity to the students to interact with each other, to share their innovative ideas, enhance their L2 learning's, thoughts, feelings and their points of view and opinion. The environment of the class should be comforting. Students should not have the fearful feeling of coming to school. They should feel free to ask any question and to put forward their ideas. They also should get motivation to listen their peers. In this peer to peer work, teacher's role should be identifying the goals of student needs and tasks should be skillful too. They also should provide higher level of support that peers could be able to receive. For example- teachers may give worksheets on cultural facts of different countries. Like their currency- Dollar, Pound, Euro etc. and if students felt difficulty there, they would ask their instructor. Cultural context helps teacher to think, to relate, to encourage students to learn new things and it makes a teacher "social agent, rather than a mere mental processing entity that acts on or reacts to stimuli in the teaching environment" (Cross, 2010, p. 437).

4.3: Face to face discussion

Face to face discussion breaks down the nervousness or anxiety of the students. Learners can gain more confidence through face to face conversations and becomes eligible to gather knowledge in a befitting manner. Therefore, teachers should set meetings weekly or monthly with the students and have a friendly conversation by using L2 language. Sometimes face to face conversation creates very much effectiveness among the students, for which they feel free to discuss their internal matters. In this discussion they can share their personal feelings, their anxiety, their eagerness, their dreams, their difficulties in families etc. These things cut off the

social obligations and thus they can get to know more about sociocultural factors. Teachers should have patience in this discussion. They should try to find out the problems of ESL learning, because face to face discussion is the easiest way to find out the difficulties and to introduce sociocultural perspective to students. Therefore, teachers should listen carefully from the students and try to give solutions to their problems.

4.4: Family or parents-

Family plays a vital role in teaching sociocultural facts to a child. Therefore, parents can be invited into the ESL classroom to assist students in learning as maximum students are more comfortable with their parents than a teacher. This step also provides a safe and secure environment for the students in their learning process. For example- students and parents may have a movie time where students can learn about sociocultural factors. Moreover, knowledge is that kind of thing which can be “constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situated activities, using the cultural artifacts at their disposal, as they work towards the collaborative achievement of a goal” (Wells, 1999, p. 140). In this section a teacher can also use the resource of family to help students attain their educational goals. They should use family members as the more component individuals to assist the students, thereby increasing their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). This turns again into Vygotsky’s (1978) theory which states that, strong connection with family helps to create scaffolding, for which a student can build their meet of identified goals. This technique also helps to acquire the primary language.

4.5: Community-

Community learning is another way of learning sociocultural sites very well. By bringing community members into the ESL classroom, students learn that there is a society or community

around them which is larger than their family. Moreover, cognitive development is also a community of practice, where a learner learns how to communicate or interact with others. (Mason, 2007, p. 2). And it accomplishes many of the same objectives as formal family members, but provides extra platform. For example- community people may introduce their own family, culture, lifestyle, interaction with one another, origin etc. Therefore, these leads students to new ways of thinking, learners can relate their community knowledge in second language acquisition and solving various problems. In community technique an instructor should use community members as the more component individuals to assist the students, thereby increasing their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development).

4.6 Interactive task –

Interactive task means, the task from which students can have better understanding about the surroundings, about the sociocultural views. And for L2 learning and interaction process, speaking and writing skills have been great activities. Sawin and Lapkin (2002) said that, speaking and writing are used as cognitive skills of a student which can mediate interaction, improve learner's psychological factors, make them social, create interest and standardize their knowledge in studies.(p.181) In addition, pair work, role play, presentation etc are considered as interactive tasks. Interactive tasks help a student to know one's culture in a more detailed way. In Bangladesh, interactive tasks are hardly seen. The education system is more likely to use memorizing than creative education system. Interactive classes create motivation among the students, create enthusiasm and eagerness. Therefore, interaction task should be organized in the family surroundings also. Teachers play a vital role in interactive tasks. They can conduct interesting games, presentations and evaluate their L2 acquisition in a befitting manner. When

they intend to do any evaluation, they might go through some criteria such as eye contact, pronunciation, body gesture etc. which will give them the view of how to give the students more knowledge about sociocultural factors.

4.7: Individual work-

Vygotsky's theory talks about small groups, but there is also an opportunity to incorporate individual work as well. The individual work also can be used as assessments. Working alone will show the teacher what the student actually knows and also how much the student's actual development has increased. For example- response paper, term paper, research work etc. are individual work and giving individual presentation is also another example to increase a student's skill for future.

Chapter-5

5. Conclusion

In this era, or in this present situation of our classroom setting, the above practices can easily be done without any heavy accommodations. To apply the practices the only need is a good and comfortable classroom environment. In addition, an instructor's dedication towards his/her students, towards their effort can bring a huge change in the education system. Moreover, if a teacher remains honest to confirm effective implementation of the proposed recommendation, the sociocultural perspective will create a great position for English learners. Furthermore, the above criteria expose students to different ways of thinking and different possible explanations. Bringing family and community members into classroom has added benefit of exposing students to new and different cultures and diversity. This kind of activity creates interest into students of thinking beyond their text books. Learning becomes fun for them.

Additionally, it creates higher standards which in turn lead to great accomplishments. The tasks also make an individual confident who grow into high producing adults. Therefore, I have found some of the facts, from which we can know the socio-cultural thoughts of students and how teachers can implement in development of these skills. Here I also wanted to mention that, from the facts, we can know the sociocultural thoughts of students and how teachers can implement sociocultural theory for the development of L2 learning. The theory of Vygotsky has some significant implications in education and cognitive testing. Moreover, instruction should be constructed within Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which can ensure the actual development of a learner. In ESL classrooms, the sociocultural theory declares that learning process is a cooperative success and not an individual's exertion. The sociocultural theory emphasizes on learning language, instruction etc can be developed by using them socially. Vygotsky's idea has effected various changes in educational system through the increased importance given to the students. Sociocultural theory improves their own learning process and the encouragement of teacher-student collaboration creates a reciprocal learning experience.

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