

Language learning, Communication, and Culture: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract: Contemporarily, it is widely assumed that communication plays a dominant role in education, especially for the second language learner. To achieve a better educational effect, this paper adopts the sociocultural theory to examine the function of mediation in classroom interaction. Some new pedagogical implications for teachers as well as the potential problems in this area will be discussed mainly.

Keywords: Sociocultural Theory; Mediation; Second Language Acquisition; Classroom Interaction

1. Introduction

In today's second language learning classroom, teachers meet unprecedented challenges in fostering learning for each student. Due to the linguistic and cultural differences, students may experience inefficient learning in an unfamiliar environment. Communication, or interacting with others, has been the essence of language. There is a great deal of language acquisition work being done through interaction that is more accessible to students. In light of Vygotsky's (1978)^[1] Sociocultural Theory, interaction is crucial within the instructional context of Second Language Acquisition's (SLA) mediation process. Therefore, the present essay attempts to explore how classroom interaction enhances SLA from a sociocultural perspective. It seeks to assess the advantages of classroom interaction as well as the potential problems. Furthermore, the essay discusses the implications for second language education and the suggestions for future research.

2. Sociocultural Perspective and Second Language Acquisition

The sociocultural perspective is primarily from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which has been applied to the field of SLA (Swain, 2000)^[2]. SCT indicated that human mental functioning is basically a mediated process, that structured by cultural artefacts, activities and concepts (Lantolf, 2000)^[3], including gestures and speech to control people's mental processes. This mediated process can be seen as the transition from external (inter-psychological) to internal (intra-psychological) control, which could also be called internalization (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006)^[4]. According to this view, SLA could be regarded as a process of mediation with three types, which are other-mediation, self-mediation, and the mediation of cultural artifacts (Bruner, 1986)^[5]. Among them, other-mediation refers to the mediation between teachers and learners, as well as the less competent students and the more expert ones, which usually happens during classroom interaction. An effective SLA is closely bound up with other-mediation, which makes other-mediation become important. When students carry out some tasks with the help of more competent people, they internalize the content by themselves during the cooperation (Kinginger, 2009)^[6]. Similarly, Vygotsky puts forward the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to demonstrate the efficiency of mediation again (Chaiklin, 2003)^[7]. He believes students are able to learn new things that go beyond their actual development through the assistance of a more capable person. In addition, Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of classroom interaction, which enrolls both students and teachers on the cooperation to practice a communicative teaching method. As the classroom interaction plays a dominant role in process of mediation of SLA, the essay puts emphasis on it.

Nevertheless, the author of this essay notices that there is a criticism of Vygotsky's approach. Lui and Matthews (2005)^[8]

point out that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory cannot apply to all social and cultural groups. That is, social groups may not be whole and equal with all learners being able to gain the same meaning from engagement. According to their studies, collaboration and participation vary from one learner to another, hence the inequality for each learner. For example, not all the learners have the capability to get the same reward from involvement, because of the possibility of learning disabilities. Students are different in the learning mindset, which produces learning constraints. Learners with a negative mindset toward learning may not be able to gain the knowledge from interactions as students who hold the positive ones. In this case, learning disabilities lead to different learning results and may be against the SCT to some degree. Therefore, the different opinions make the interrelationships among learners, teachers, and classroom interaction are worth discussing in the context of the classroom.

3. The Advantages of Classroom Interaction

3.1 Teacher-student interaction

The interaction between teachers and students improves students' language learning by simulating a language context. Under an unfamiliar cultural context, language learning could have some difficulties when students are inhibited by target cultural elements. In this case, SCT suggests that teachers can simulate the context of the target language for students through holding activities. For instance, teachers can give students a situation and then ask them to make a decision on what to do in a short time. During the conversation, teachers can praise their courage and give some professional suggestions (i.e., the corrections of pronunciation or grammatical form). The purpose of this activity is for students to think and speak in the target language automatically. In this way, not only can students' cultural understanding be improved, but also their communication skills strengthen.

3.2 Student-student interaction

After discussing the interaction between teachers and students, it can be seen that SLA can also be improved in the way of interaction between students. Students are usually closer to their peers for they feel more comfortable learning from each other and are willing to express themselves in communication. Based on this feature, SCT believes students can observe or imitate their peers so as to internalize their strengths into their own. For example, a student was glad to find a more expert peer to revise his English essays in a peer interaction research (Aimin, 2013)^[9]. During this situation, the more capable student evaluated the peer's work and pointed out some errors. Besides, they were glad to share some English academic culture with each other. The lacking of specific norms about local academic culture has always been a common problem for second language learners, which stems from the differences in their own cultural backgrounds. The low proficiency student can learn from his peers and corrected some mistakes. Through this effective peer interaction, students' language comprehension and communication ability can be promoted actively, thus their English levels increase.

4. The Potential Problems of Student-Student Interaction

Although classroom interaction is useful in SLA, there still could find a barrier for the students with learning disabilities. These students are hard to reconcile themselves to the classroom interaction. For instance, some students who have a negative mindset are stressed with inadequate language skills, because the high linguistic proficiency is the requirement for joining the interaction actively. As the mediated process can be seen as internalization, these students' problems can be considered a kind of ineffectual internalization. Pawanchik et al. (2011)^[10] showed that the second language learners with low linguistic capacity were unable to engage in group discussions due to shyness and passivity. In this ineffectual internalization, the transition from external to internal is interrupted because of students' negative mindset, shyness, passivity and so on. They felt afearred to consult peers and make mistakes. Likewise, some English learners from Arab World universities also stated that they did not have enough capability to actively participate in classroom interaction. These learners perceived their peers possessed higher language skills than them, so they tended to consider themselves inferior.

Students with learning difficulties may not internalize the contents well during the process of cooperation, which results

in ineffectual internalization. Some researches illustrate the less competent students' psychological factors, such as fear and low motivation. Although they view the classroom interaction as useful to acquire language and also make a great effort to achieve the goal, they can be frustrated when they find themselves do not sound intelligent or even show insufficient linguistic abilities. As a result, it leads to poor language learning. Therefore, in classroom interaction, the external conditions could have some adverse impacts during the students' internalization. In student-student interaction, instead of the suggestions in SCT, not all the learners are suitable for the classroom mediation.

5. Pedagogical Implications

Through the analysis of SLA's mediation process from a sociocultural perspective, there are some useful pedagogical implications for SLA. Teachers primarily should attach importance to the effective learning approach presented by SCT and interact with capable learners in the SLA classroom. As previous studies showed, this kind of interaction can help learners break away from complex sociocultural barriers whether in verbal or non-verbal communication. During this process, teachers may discover various pedagogical methods to set up classroom interactions, for example, communicating with students in creative ways or organizing students to work in partnerships to complete classroom tasks. Nevertheless, there still exist a few problems. Some second language learners are hindered from participating in classroom activities actively resulting of their inadequate language abilities. Then it would lead to mental strain, fear, and lack of motivation, which largely affect students' learning state. To avoid these situations, teachers must take these negative factors into consideration and provide the necessary support for them.

6. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the present essay believes that the mediation of classroom interaction can promote SLA in the context of the classroom. In SCT, teachers and students serve as mediators, facilitating the communicative interaction in class. It is not only a valuable tool for students to gain language competency, but it also aids teachers in their teaching process. However, there are potential issues with the mediation of classroom interaction. It is likely that students will experience negative emotions, which may nullify the learning benefit. Thus, a teaching problem exists and should be addressed further. Furthermore, because this essay is primarily concerned with how less competent students benefit from the learning process, it misses the group of high proficiency students to some extent. As shown by Cerda et al (2009)^[11], classroom interaction is a complicated process. The essay will take these weaknesses into account in future research and practice more to assist the accomplishment of all second language learners, making the study more comprehensive.

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