Sociocultural Theories in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Sociocultural theories have been discussed in the context of English acquisition among young English language learners in early childhood settings. A range of sociocultural perspectives drawn for the research, includes (i) the mental and cognitive processes involved in language acquisition (ii) social environment is not the context for, but rather the source of, mental development and (iii) the complex interaction between the individual acting with mediational means and the sociocultural context.

Sociocultural theories (SCT), developed by Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s, describe human cognition as developed by an individual through engagement in social and cultural activities with other people, objects, and events (Vygotsky, 1978; Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011). In the context of Malaysian early childhood education, second language acquisition (SLA) of English language learners (ELLs) arises from the process of meaning-making in collaborative activity with other members of a given culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Lantolf (2001) argued that sociocultural theories are not theories of the social and cultural aspects; rather they are theories of mind that acknowledge the important role of social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts that organise human forms of thinking in a unique way. While most theories of mind recognise the presence of social milieu in which cognition grows, Vygotsky argued for the uniqueness of the social milieu (Lantolf, 2001). Vygotsky (1978) conceives of sociocultural settings as the primary and determining factor in the development of higher forms of human mental activity.

Sociocultural theories have been extended to a wide number of domains including second language acquisition. Second language acquisition (SLA) is concerned with how individuals acquire a language other than their native language. Saville-Troike (2012) defined second language acquisition as the study of individuals or groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children. SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily from within linguistics and psychology, which emphasises the mental and cognitive processes involved in language acquisition apart from other fields such as linguistics and sociolinguistics (Saville-Troike, 2012). Sociocultural theories in second language acquisition research offer a framework through which human cognition can be systematically investigated without isolating it from social context (Lantolf, 2011; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

Throughout the past few decades, psychologists and psycholinguists have discussed SLA from different perspectives. One of these perspectives is behaviourism which suggests that language learning occurs through a series of stimuli and responses and that all learning is the establishment of habit as a result of reinforcement (Aimin, 2013; Skinner, 1948). Skinner (1948), a leading behaviourist, claimed that language is a verbal behaviour. Language learners can be made to produce and comprehend language if they are being reinforced to do so. The behaviorists believe that second langauge learners imitate what they hear and develop habits in the second language by routine practice (Saville-Troike, 2012). As a behaviourist perspective focuses on observable behaviour, this theory neglects mental processes involved when a child acquires a language (Aimin, 2013; Chomsky, 1959; Virues-Ortega, 2006). In addition, there has been a critic that imitation does not help the learner in real-life situations (Chomsky, 1959; Saville-Troike, 2012).

An alternative perspective to behaviourism, led by Noam Chomsky (1959), focuses on cognitivism and critiques Skinner's theory of verbal behaviour. As a cognitivist, Chomsky (1959) proposed that human beings are born with a genetic capability that predisposes them to the systematic perception of language around them, resulting in the construction of an internalised system of language. Within Chomsky's theory, Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is a mechanism which simply needs to be triggered by the linguistic environment in order to start operating. Chomsky (1959) claimed that language acquisition is a complete mental process. In the cognitive view, second language learners are thought to creatively use their skills of cognition in order to figure out the second language on their own. For example, the learners notice a pattern and construct their own rules accordingly, then go back and change the rules if they are faulty. In this approach to SLA, the learners benefit from their mistakes because they are playing an active role in the FLL process and learning first-hand how the language works. However, cognition is not the only factor that learners use to make assumptions about a language (Ellis, 2008; Saville-Troike, 2012). It has been viewed that some errors learners make are based on rules of the first language; they are influenced by these rules as opposed to coming to conclusions based on their cognitive abilities. Another problem is that it is not always possible to deduce what the FL learner meant to say, and therefore the error cannot be clearly determined. However, cognitive perspectives focusing on learning as an individual mental event ignore social processes (Ellis, 2008; Aimin, 2013).

Another perspective of language acquisition which depicts the interrelated cognitive and social characteristics is based on Vygotskian sociocultural theories. Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in SLA research that is informed by sociocultural theories (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a; Swain & Deters, 2007). In 1985, Frawley and Lantoff (as cited Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a) started exploring the potential relevance of sociocultural theories for second language acquisition in the mid-1980s. The authors were initially interested in investigating how second language speakers used their new language as a mediation while doing difficult tasks (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006b) and how second language learners developed the ability to use their new language as a mediation their mental and communicative ability (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

Since then, a great deal of research that is directly or indirectly informed by sociocultural theories has been carried out in the second language acquisition discipline (Lantolf, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

Sociocultural theories differ fundamentally from other perspectives in second language acquisition because of their understanding that social environment is not the context for, but rather the source of, mental development (Swain & Deters, 2007). Whereas other perspectives focus on an individual and what the individual is doing, SCT takes into account the complex interaction between the individual acting with mediational means and the sociocultural context (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In other words, sociocultural theories emphasise what tools the person is acting with, where the action takes place, and why the person is acting (Swain & Deters, 2007).

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