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Sociocultural Theory as an Approach to Aid EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has long been regarded a challenging task. Said challenge is clearly evident in the many studies attempting to delineate some of the major problems faced by EFL learners while trying to uncover both the sources and the solutions. This paper turns to the Vygotskian approach to language learning, in particular to sociocultural theory, to understand the learning of English as a foreign language. Herein, L2 learners receive interaction-based instruction to assist them in the social construction of knowledge. In other words, in the Vygotskian classroom, the learners' learning activities are mediated by the teacher's scaffolding of their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This paper posits that manipulating the sociocultural context of the EFL classroom can help learners attain better communication, be trained in strategic orientation to learning, and, more importantly, become capable communicators in a social community.

INTRODUCTION

English in non-English speaking countries is used in two contexts: English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL). Unlike the ESL context, where English is used as a means of communication and is learnt through communication in social situation, in the EFL context English has no vital function in people's everyday life and communication, and, as Yarahmadi (2008) notes, it is learned through classroom instruction and the use of audio-visual materials for educational and/or academic purposes, job opportunities, and increasing the possibility of higher education. In such situations, learners do not have any immediate purpose to use English for communicative functions and consequently are not provided with opportunities to engage in and develop language-learning strategies (Lan, 2005).

One of the most serious problems EFL students face in learning English is that they are almost incapable of communicating in English even after graduating from university (Sadeghi

2005; Maleki & Zangani, 2007). Vaezi (2008) argued that this problem is partly due to the L2 learners' weaknesses in general English, which ultimately influence their academic achievement. In addition to learners' difficulties, research indicates that EFL teachers also have problems in their teaching and assessment methods. Non-native teachers who are less confident in their proficiency are reluctant to adopt teaching methods and opportunities that are more target language-intensive (Hortwiz, 1996; Li, 1998). Hayati (2009) expressed a similar view, pointing out that most EFL classes still follow the traditional methods of language teaching. In most classes the instructional material is limited to the textbook and the teacher schedules use of this material. The teacher instructs the whole class and determines the content of learning. The students have very limited opportunity to talk about their learning processes and experiences. As a result, they are highly passive and dependent on the teacher. This leads to minimum interaction and makes students recipients of the teacher's knowledge. Accordingly, little room is left for the use of L2 communicative functions which is especially important in classrooms where students learn the L2 as a foreign language and have very restricted contact with the target language outside of classroom (Duff & Polio, 1990; Polio & Duff, 1994).

It is believed that in some classes, teachers' intervention or scaffolding does not encourage learners to either have or improve their sense of self-regulation and self-assessment. Indeed, assessment methods by some teachers hinder real communicative interaction and even interrupt the emergence of communicative strategies. For instance, in the current Iranian listening-speaking classes, teachers fail to scaffold their learners's knowledge who, in turn, do not engage in active modes of instruction such as group discussions, language games, or other viable interaction-based activities and tasks. In fact, interaction between peers and peers and teacher is not pivotal in the teaching and learning process. Functional practice strategies or social uses of foreign language in communicative situations (e.g., finding ways to communicate with foreign tourists) are rarely used. But instead, the strategies the students are presently advised to employ are kinds of traditional pedagogic practices such as dialogue memorization, fill-in-the-blanks exercises, and retelling the complete listening text

From the above discussion, it can be surmised that the main source of EFL learners' problems emphasized in this paper is the 'classroom culture,' a culture that includes traditional teacher-centered curricula and traditional pedagogic practices such as dialogue memorization, and one that lacks any encouragement for self-regulation and self-assessment. This situation calls for a shift in classroom culture from a teacher-directed process to a more interaction-based pedagogy. Looking through a sociocultural lens, some of the difficulties EFL learners face can be traced to their learning context. It is rather obvious that language learning is to a great extent dependent on the classroom's social life. This is evident in Vygotsky's (1978) theory in which the social process, interactions, and the use of signs and tools as vehicles for constructing knowledge are emphasized.

The assumption of this paper is that reconfiguring the culture of EFL classrooms based on sociocultural theory of learning will address in part some of the EFL learners' communication problems. In order to contextualize Vygotskian-based description of classroom culture, the paper first provides some crucial information concerning sociocultural theory and some of the key components of the theory. This information facilitates the understanding of the application of the sociocultural theory to the EFL classrooms here envisaged, the basic concern of this paper.

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Sociocultural theory or ‘cultural-historical psychology is a theory of the development of higher mental practices which regards social interaction as the core of communication and learning process. Its origin is derived from the sociological and economic writings of Marx and Engels in eighteenth-and nineteenth century. The theory emerged from the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), Leont’ev (1981), and Wertsch (1985).

One of the outstanding features of sociocultural theory is considering learning as social in nature where meaning is derived through language use within the social context. Contrary to the followers of cognitive theories who believed in mediation between stimulus and the response, Vygotsky’s (1978) theory investigates the context of the behavior or the social situation where the action occurs. The basic assumption in Vygotsky’s theory is the idea that psychological structures do not exist in the individual’s mind; rather, they are formed as a result of interaction with the social context. In other words, the emergence of mental functions depends on social interaction.

According to Mitchell and Myles (2004) sociocultural theory views learners as active constructs of their own learning environment. Confirming Mitchell and Myle’s viewpoint, Guoxing (2004) states that learners in this sense are responsible for their own learning environment and the environment can nurture and scaffold them (Aimin, 2013). Accordingly, teachers are seen as active constructors of their own teaching environment. Whatever teachers think of learners’ language learning will definitely affect their constructions of their teaching environment, though learners are the main focus of the teaching activities. Teachers will reconstruct their perceptions of L2 through practice and progress in language learning and teaching.

It is worth noting here that the main focus of the sociocultural perspective is not on the individual but on the individual’s surroundings. Claiming that learning is a social activity, sociocultural experts such as Cole and Engeström (1993), Van Lier (2000), and Lantolf (2000) made a shift in their attention from individual cognition into mental activity of members of the same social community. Wertsch (1991), for example, emphasizes that sociocultural point of view should be distinguished from the other perspectives (e.g., constructivism) based on the context or surrounding of the learners. Learning is considered as the product of shared activity and the traditional teacher-student relationship should be changed to one that leads to collaborative learning (Zhang, Fanyu, & Du 2013). In this sense, solutions to learners’ problems are gained through the involved participants’ or members’ behaviors in a shared context. The ‘expert’ member or knowledgeable other assists other members who need help in the learning process. This guidance is stopped when the members who need help can act independently. This problem-solving process is accomplished by two learners who possess different levels of knowledge and experiences. In other words, as a result of this guidance, a novice gradually becomes the effective member of that community.

As Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) state, “successful learning involves shifting control within activities from the social to the individual, from the external to within self” (p. 232). This is evident in Vygotsky’s (1981) description of cultural development: “Any function in the child’s development appears twice or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category” (p. 163). Expressed differently, the most significant contribution of sociocultural perspective to learning and consequently decreasing learners’ problems is providing a supportive environment for cognitive

development. Thus, for any learner to be successful in language learning, during social interaction within a classroom, it is necessary to change his learning status from first dependent other-regulation to subsequent independent self-regulation.

Mediation

Mediation is one of the most significant constructs of Vygotsky's (1978) theory, which is also central to this study. According to Vygotsky, humans do not make their relationship with the outer world only through direct stimulus-response reflexes; rather, they have the ability to use physical tools to make indirect connections and mediate their relationship. In so doing, they can regulate and control their behaviors via psychological and technical tools or artifacts. The physical tools mediating these relationships are generated by human cultures and are gradually transferred to the next generation. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is a mediated process. Mitchell and Myles (2004) believe that "learning is mediated partly through learner's developing use and control of mental tools" (p. 195).

Lantolf (2000) presented three versions of mediation: mediation by others, mediation by self through private speech, and mediation by artifacts (e.g., tasks and technology). Being grounded in Vygotskian perspective and considering Lantolf's taxonomy of mediation, this paper treats mediation by others as the domain of the teacher of the EFL classroom with the focus on the teacher's teaching and scaffolding methods. Human development is not just the outcome of one's personal attempt and individual function but it is a result of a system of social connections and relations.

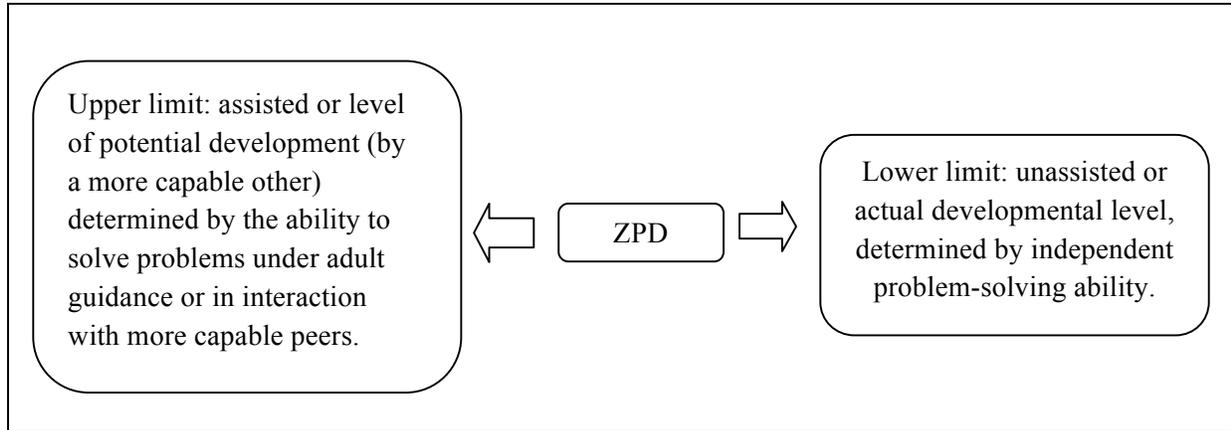
Three conceptual resources are introduced by Gao (2010) which mediate language learners' language learning: learning discourses, artifacts and material conditions, and social agents (p. 21). By contextual resources, Gao means any learner's beliefs and values present in the learning context in relation with foreign language learning which may affect learning processes in general and strategy use in particular. He emphasizes that the function of learners' discourses is different at the micro-level and macro-level, as micro-level discourses reinforce the learners to be responsible for their learning processes. For instance, they can control and identify the steps required for removing a learning problem. However, at the macro-level discourses are indicators of learners' values in learning a target language along with the goals they intend to obtain through strategy use.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding

To attain self-regulation, individual learners need to expand their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As Smidt (2009) notes, the ZPD is one of Vygotsky's central contributions to learning and teaching that arises from his focus on the significance of cultural tools and social learning. Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). To bridge the gap between Vygotsky's theory of ZPD and its utility in L2 classroom, Ohta (2001) presents an adapted version of Vygotsky's definition suitable to this context: "For the L2 learner, the ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced collaboratively with a peer or teacher" (p. 9). As illustrated in Figure 1, from Vygotsky's point of view the difference between

potential level and actual development is that the former serves more as an indication of mental development than the latter as only a learner with an advanced level of development is able to react to the support provided by the more experienced *other*.

Figure1. Representation of ZPD



Vygotsky (1981) believed that during socialization and interacting with others the child is faced with participating in activities with others. This is the first step for the learner to be part of the shared culture through sharing something with another member in that community. Thus, his cognitive development would take place through involvement or “through participation in an ongoing social world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 50). Nassaji and Cumming (2000) conducted a case study to explain and illustrate different features of the ZPD in language teaching and learning. To do so, they analyzed 95 exchanges obtained from a six-year-old Farsi speaker’s dialogue journal and that of a Canadian teacher who were working interactively with each other for more than 10 months. Their research indicated how both teacher and student constructed a conversation, which involved “intricate patterns of complementary, asymmetrical scaffolding” (Nassaji & Cumming 2000, p. 103). The basic and crucial tool for creating a long-term environment for both teacher and student to interact and communicate was the dialogue journal. Through the dialogue journal and the teacher’s contribution, the young ESL student was able to attain understanding of some appropriate features of English. The use of the dialogue journal also helped the teacher recognize his student’s capabilities. In fact, both participants were mutually and jointly engaged in a common knowledge, goals, and means of communication.

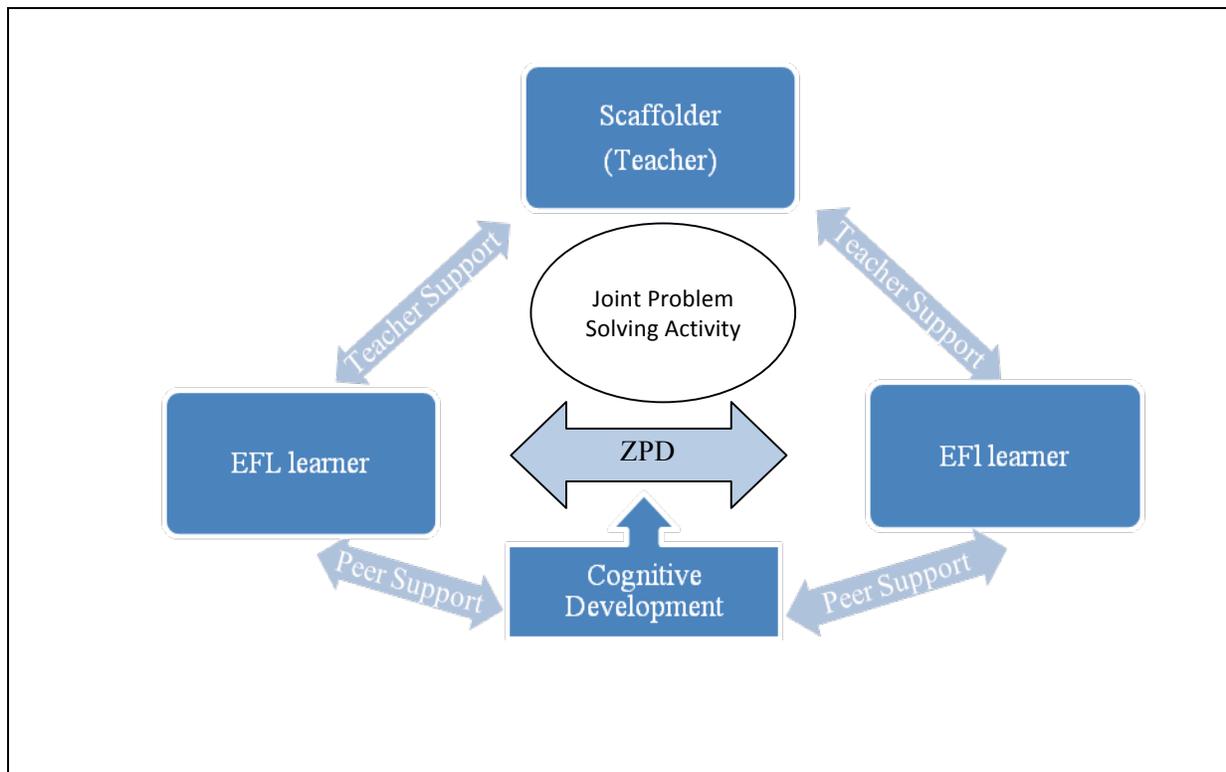
CONSTRUCTING A VYGOTSKIAN-BASED EFL CLASSROOM CULTURE

Regarding the discussions and studies reported so far, it can be surmised that sociocultural theory enables the researchers to investigate individuals’ learning and how their learning is affected by the context in which interaction is germane and central to the process of learning. As previously mentioned, the main intent of this paper is to reconfigure EFL classroom culture to reduce part of the learners’ communication problems. It is implicit that organizing EFL classrooms based on Vygotskian sociocultural theory takes some steps to enrich the social setting of learning in an EFL context.

Clearly, within social context of a classroom EFL learners face some tasks or structures that are impossible to accomplish without receiving social assistance from other capable peers or the teacher. This problematic aspect in learners' development maximizes the need for providing assistance in students' ZPD. Again, drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory, the attempt is to organize a social context in which a more capable peer would be paired with a less capable one. In this scenario, the former would be able to promote the latter's ability and knowledge. Consequently, as depicted in Figure 2, this joint problem-solving context would lead to cognitive development, which, in turn, facilitates the possibility of strategy development in learning. Vygotsky's use of the problem-solving activity is vital enough to justify the distinction between an individual learner's actual development level and potential level. In an attempt to collaborate with a more capable other, whether teacher or peer, in problem-solving activity, the learner indicates that the distance between his actual level of development and potential level is his zone of proximal development.

Language learners need to expand and bridge their ZPD through support received from the expert and what is called scaffolding. Thus, an EFL language learner as a novice and the teacher as an expert or more 'capable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) can interact with each other in a social setting of classroom which lead to the enhancement of learning. In such a context, to facilitate the learners' cognitive development and social construction of knowledge within their ZPD, the teacher may scaffold students in different ways such as giving helpful suggestions in the process of doing tasks, asking leading questions, drawing tables and charts, and giving feedback concerning the students' group work.

Figure 2. Interaction and Collaboration Among Learners, Peers, and Teacher in an EFL Context



In this classroom, through social activity, students develop a framework for their learning under the guidance of an expert. Here, the teacher's role is central, as it is the teacher who

provides a supportive environment for students to learn as they become involved in the performance of different language tasks deemed necessary for learning. Asking the students to do a role-play while pretending to be in an authentic context, engage in group discussions, and complete interaction-based language tasks are but few representative examples here which can help individuals develop their personal knowledge.

Tharp and Gallimore (1990) presented a four-stage model for the operationalization of the ZPD in learning and teaching context that can equally be applied in the EFL classrooms. In the first stage the learner is provided with assistance from the teacher, or any other capable peer through language or other tools. In the second stage, although the learner's performance is not completely improved, the learner, without assistance, accomplishes the task. In the third stage, the learner's performance is improved and automatized. Finally, the fourth stage is "where de-automatization of performance leads to recursion through the zone of proximal development" (Sharpe, 2003, p. 29). In light of possible fossilization, the scaffolder once again backslides to assistance through learner's ZPD, and the teacher repeats a lesson either as a reinforcement of subject or part of a remedial lesson.

It is worth noting here that scaffolding in educational context is different from asking for help in the sense that the former is a kind of support or assistance provided to the learner to accomplish a particular task believed to be impossible to realize without such support. Additionally, in the scaffolding process, the teacher could teach and reinforce some required critical skills to be undertaken in other similar contexts. In any given classroom, scaffolding is dependent on factors such as a teacher's capability to offer scaffolded instruction. Teachers willing to scaffold instruction should have knowledge of performing targeted scaffolding activities so as not to replace instruction with merely simple help. Other factors worthy of consideration here are context, including the social and physical setting, mutual relationship and understanding between student and teacher, and the nature of the learning tasks students are asked to complete.

In the process of the student-teacher interaction, it is not solely the teacher that is the active participant here, but, more importantly, the learner becomes the active participant within the scaffolding process which, in turn, is a dynamic reciprocal process. Both teacher and learner construct a shared understanding by means of communicative exchanges in which the student, as a novice, learns from the teacher, as a more expert other. So argued, and in light of the dynamic nature of scaffolding, it is not prudent to apply the same techniques of scaffolding in different contexts for it depends upon the situation encountered such as the kind of task/activity, students' responses, and level of proficiency.

Thus, in any EFL context, it could be assumed that the use of different mediational tools such as keeping diary by the learners in which they can transfer their learning experiences from their classroom context, establishes good opportunities in terms of interaction for classroom members. This interaction is a key to most events (discussions, role-play) inside classroom. Likewise, the nature of language tasks introduced by teacher, creates a natural context for collaboration and interaction. As through these tasks and activities students are required to exchange information and thus understand each other. In this way, mutual interaction between teacher and students and between students and their peers would be promoted. This enhanced interactive relationship is supposed to raise students' interest and motivation in exploring natural features of the target language, which could result in effective communication by employing a set of learning strategies.

Based on the Vygotskian perspective of scaffolding, a teacher tries to encourage and strengthen independent learning as it is the teacher who is able to recognize the learner's zone of

proximal development. As a result, learners' mental processes and functions should be developed through joint collaboration with the teacher. In the process of completing language-learning tasks, both teacher and learners enjoy a shared problem-solving experience in collaborating and interacting with one another. Murray and McPherson (2006) reported on teacher action research and tried to manifest teachers' scaffolded activities, which were designed to ease learners' reading and navigating the Web. Their findings indicate that learners' successful reading and navigation directly depend on the teachers who are advised to include both effective and carefully designed scaffolded activities in their instruction to encourage learners to become independent navigators of the Web.

CONCLUSION

This paper tried to bridge the gap between sociocultural theory and the challenges foreign language learners' face in learning English as a foreign language. The use of Vygotsky's (1978) theory promotes a learning context in which the teacher acts as a facilitator of meaning construction during the instruction process, a process will serves to strengthen still more the reciprocal relationship between students and teacher. Using the principles of sociocultural theory in the classroom helps learners achieve certain communicative targets. It is hypothesized that such a setting helps learners take responsibility for their own learning, regulate their learning, and have a sense of self-assessment. By setting communicative goals believed to be attainable through further flexibility and adaptability of learning strategies to other language activities, learners are indeed able to develop a critical set of learning strategies deemed viable to language learning and communication. Such an approach is likely to lead to both strategic orientation to learning and training of motivated and capable communicators in social community.

In sum, teachers can apply their understanding of language learners' strategies in their teaching and assessment methods which, in turn, would reduce the foreign language learners' learning load and would result in better social communication. Language teachers are therefore strongly counseled to reduce the learners' burden of learning foreign languages by utilizing different forms of mediation in their teaching and assessing procedures. In so doing, learners would most likely prove themselves capable of harnessing the advantages of the efficacy of such engaging communicative classrooms.

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