

Sociocultural theory: Insight and Appropriateness

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the sociocultural theory (SCT) and to criticize the theory widely-cited in language learning and teaching in comparison with cognitive theories. SCT originally explains how a mother and a child interacts to construct knowledge. How SCT supports learning in the classroom context will be explained. The article also sheds the light to teaching and learning in the Thai classroom. This section highlights on going problems in English language teaching and learning. The last section analyses whether the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which has been claimed an effective approach to teach a language is indeed appropriate to the Thai context in association with SCT.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) is the foremost scholar in the field of Sociocultural Theory (SCT); he made a great contribution to the understanding of teaching and learning. Sociocultural theory states that social interaction provides an essential means of learning. The social interaction and cultural institutions (such as classrooms, universities and families) have important roles to play in the cognitive growth and development of students (Donata and McCormick, 1994; Anton, 1999). Vygotsky asserts that social processes contribute to cognitive development and the individual's knowledge is socially and dialogically constructed in a social interaction. The theory emphasises the dialogic processes (such as scaffolding) that emerge in an interaction and how these processes constitute language use and learning. Ellis (2000) elaborates that one of the central claims of SCT is that all participants always co-construct the knowledge in the activity they engage in. This theory apparently offers an important framework for investigating interrelationships of teaching and learning across contexts. In this article, SCT is adopted to understand language learning and teaching in Thailand which may

lead to practical ways to Thai students in classroom. SCT considers teachers as a mentor and facilitator while Thais have a social norm of teachers being a second parent for kids. How these two roles can be hands in hands and accelerate language learning will be emphasized in this article.

Vygotsky (1978, p.86) also stresses the significant role of teachers and interaction in the process of learning as he proposes a “zone of proximal development” (ZPD hereafter) to serve the necessity of guidance from teachers and interaction with peers in classroom learning. Therefore the roles of teachers under SCT are to provide help. Critically, how to provide help and what the help looks like in the language classroom may differ from context to context. With reference to the SCT this study believes that teachers provide help or guide the students differently depending on inherent social and cultural influences and the context of their surroundings.

Lantolf started working on SCT and L2 acquisition and use in the mid 1980s and continued work over the following two decades. In Lantolf’s two articles (1993, 1995), he emphasises dialogically constructed identity for language teaching and learning within SCT which moves SCT away from previous theories in SLA which emphasise SCT in relation to L2 development. He argues that dialogic interaction is a central concept in SCT. Dialogue characterises freedom and voices. Symbolic freedom explains the capacity of dialogue to allow the individual to construct their own voice, in which voice refers to point of view and motive. Level of freedom varies from the lowest level of language, phoneme, lexis, and syntax to the higher one-utterances. At the lowest level, code (phonemes) is unlikely to be broken, changed or violated; at the higher level of language, one can observe more flexibility when producing utterances.

Lantolf and Apple (1994) state that language plays a critical role in an appropriation process as a primary cultural symbolic artifact. In SCT the development of a higher form of thinking is mediated by social interaction. The theory explains that social interaction has a much more central role to play in learning. Interaction itself constructs learning which takes place first in social or inter-mental phases, then in personal or intra-mental phases.

Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) review the work on SCT during the 1980s and 1990s and argue that the collaborative perspectives on language learning and language use are informed by SCT. They support SCT in learning and question theories which separate learners and instructors, speakers and hearers, and experimental research. They encourage studies to see everyday life or real classrooms since learning takes place in socially dialogical instruction.

Regarding learning and SCT Lantolf (2000, p. 67) clarifies how SCT explains occurrences of learning. He states that SCT proposes that

Humans attain the capability to voluntarily control and regulate their memory, attention, perception, learning, planning and development as they appropriate mediating artifact including language as they are brought into culturally specified and organized activities.

This notion asserts within which specific types of activity one is capable of learning and able to control how to learn if he or she is provided with the appropriate help. Lantolf's (2000) focus appears to embrace fundamental ideas of SCT and sufficiently elaborates on teaching and learning; however, these perspectives do not specify how language serves or functions under SCT in a language classroom.

Accordingly SCT offers a wide range of concepts which make attempts to explicate the relationship of learning and mind. These concepts are mediation, ZPD and internalisation. Many studies have adopted these individual concepts to understand the different settings of study or different processes of learning; however, they all share interaction as a crucial role in learning in common as a core concept in SCT.

Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives

This section intends to review Cognitive and Sociocultural perspectives in detail to pinpoint which perspective can best fit second language acquisition (SLA). Different theories and models offer explanations and understanding of the complex nature of language in the classroom and SLA. van Lier (1996, p. 254) distinguishes two trends among theories and models which lead to a debate between cognitive and situative or contextualised perspectives. The former is classified as a constructivist-oriented approach in which attempts are made to understand and explain what computational processes happen in the brain. The latter are social or constructionist approaches that emphasise the roles of social and other contextual processes. This group encompasses Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

An elaborate perspective of cognitive development is presented by van Lier (1996, p. 257). He proposes that the input-output metaphor commonly employed in cognitive approaches to SLA separates brain and mind and takes them as vessels of learning processes and learning products. In response to van Lier, Thoms (2008) states that terms of input or output may maintain the notion that language learning is an information processing-oriented practice that may exist regardless of the context in which it is taking place. This could imply that the input-output concept views an

instructor's job as one in which language knowledge is conveyed to learners via input; therefore, the instructor is viewed as an all-knowing source of L2 knowledge, and the learner is a separated recipient.

Even though the cognitive approach has contributed much to the understanding of SLA, Gass (2003) and Ellis (2003) argue that the constructs of input are reductionistic and fail to account for the social and contextual factors that are indispensable in all language-learning environments. Another view from Kern (2006) addresses the fact that a limitation of interactionist theory is its focus only on linguistic interactions at the expense of cultural dimensions of language learning; on the other hand, sociocultural theory places importance on learner interactions, and the cultural situation of learner activity, learner agency in co-constructing meaning, and the importance of mediation by tools and signs.

Similarly, Firth and Wagner (1997) propose that the field of SLA has primarily followed cognitive orientation since the 1980s. They elaborate on cognitive-oriented research which assumes that language acquisition happens inside the brain without much attention paid to the social and contextual factors. They also call for moves to encompass research that employs socially-oriented theories to investigate social and contextual factors which are equally important to the mental process.

With reference to the literature discussed above, sociocultural perspectives seem to address problematic issues claimed in cognitive or input-related theories by taking social and cultural instances in a particular context of language learning into consideration. Critically, in the Thai EFL classrooms, there are numerous factors or instances which may not be found in other contexts such as Thai-English code switching, and learners' low English proficiency.

Criticisms of Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory approaches have been established in numerous and divergent disciplines, but all have the same goal of understanding humans' thinking mind (Wertsch, 1995, p. 14). When it comes to language teaching and learning and SLA, there is a substantive critique of SCT claims that language is a tool or mediation in learning, and that it does not provide a detailed aspect-conceptualisation of language or how it mediates, or which aspects of language serve mediation (Mitchell and Myles, 1998; Thorne, 2005). Thorne (2005) states that researchers have presumptions of consistency across context, time or communities. It is not the case when researchers assume that SCT has a positive valence for all contexts. She elaborates that the individual learner has differing potential to participate in and produce meaning in the interaction, but researchers seem to consider the context as a whole. Concerning research in this field,

Donato (1994) comments that it has heavy theoretical concepts to explain what is observed, but it is often parsimonious with data.

Lantolf (2004, pp. 30-31) argues for SCT against the cognition-based theory, in that this theory is fundamentally based on “mind”, despite the label “sociocultural”, which offers a framework to understand how social relationships and culturally-constructed artifacts organise humans’ way of thinking. Later work from Lantolf and Thorne on SCT (2006) maintains the extension of Vygotsky’s theoretical work into L2 acquisition by appropriating the concepts of mediation and internalisation. He concentrates on mediation and internalisation in future research of SCT. Regarding mediation, he argues that Vygotsky’s basic concept explains that mental activity arises as a result of the functional system formed by humans’ biologically specified mental capacities and culturally constructed symbolic artifacts. He encourages future research to find out insightfully how adult learners deploy language to mediate their psychological activity and sustain their L2 to achieve a successful task outcome. In this article he emphasises that gesture is one of the mediation tools of humans; he articulates it as one of the forms of the inner speech of humans, and questions how gesture-speech interface in L2 use is unclear: can L2 speakers use gestures in the same way that a native uses them?

I now discuss the issues above. From my point of view, SCT offers rich descriptions of language as a mediated tool in learning. There are numerous studies which do not merely provide descriptions or elaborations on SCT or its fundamental concepts; for example, Swain and Lapkin (1998) showed a dialogue as a mean of communication and a cognitive tool when two adult learners co-construct the language they need to express the meaning and to co-construct their knowledge about language. This study is compelling and rigorous since evidence of cognitive process is found as the two adults continually produce alternatives, evaluate their alternatives and apply their learned knowledge to solve linguistic problems. Anton (1999) found communicative moves such as directives, assisting questions and repetition mediate the negotiation process between the learners and the teachers. Regarding these studies I believe that it has been proved what language as a mediated tool looks like, but it may not describe in sufficient depth how certain linguistic aspects work or serve this role.

Secondly I agree with criticisms of the overstatement of SCT. Sociocultural Theory is not a panacea. It is a relatively broad conceptualised theory which encompasses constructs ranging from superficial concepts of interaction to psychologically in-depth concepts of thinking and cognition. This point was already echoed by Swain and Lapkin (1998) when they questioned if a kind of successful co-constructed learning and knowledge resulting from mediated language would emerge in

low proficiency students. I argue this point that researchers or practitioners of SCT need to be critical and selective to adopt a certain construct to underpin their studies; and SCT may not be able to explain every individual context.

Regarding the issue raised by Donato (1994), I argue that an amount of data in one study should be adequate for its analysis and able to reveal distinctive outcomes. I rather question a few types of data in the SCT studies, where transcripts from dialogues are mostly found, rather than other types of data.

Additionally I question the concept of interpsychological and intrapsychological phases in the internalisation explained by Lantolf (2004). It has proved difficult to find supportive evidence for this. Other concepts within SCT appear practical, tangible, and empirical. For example ZPD as Thorne (2005) mentioned is the most proliferate contribution and has the greatest impact in L2, and there are numerous empirical studies that address this concept (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994; Donato, 1994; Nassaji and Swain, 2000). My doubts may correspond to those expressed by Mitchell and Myles (1998); they suggested that the interaction between contextual factors and learning development attributed to the innate linguistic structure is assumed, not demonstrated.

Sociocultural Theory: A Context of Learning in a Classroom

The term “sociocultural” indicates the importance of both social and cultural aspects of the learning environment when knowledge is being constructed. It is important to acknowledge what social and cultural contexts of learning are. Knowledge is not constructed in isolation, but in the context of practices, language and culture of the learning situation concerned. From this perspective, learning in a classroom needs to consider what social interaction in a particular classroom may look like and what the culture of such learning may bring about. Particularly in a language classroom, the teacher constructs knowledge with students through a variety of media such as written materials, recordings, and oral language. Language classrooms are not different to subject-matter classrooms in this respect.

Overview of English teaching in Thailand

Thailand has its own national language, Thai, as a medium of communication across the country on a daily basis. English takes the role of the dominant foreign language in the country (Durongphan et al, 1982). This makes English learning in Thailand English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Use of or exposure to English therefore is limited, i.e. to particular groups of professionals or places such as international companies or educational institutions, or to international programmes of study. However, English is one of the compulsory courses in any higher education-level programme. The Commission

on Higher Education of Thailand has required that university students take at least 12 credits of English language before they graduate (Wiriyachitra, 2001). Teaching English in Thailand can be portrayed that whole-class instruction takes place, with a focus on lecturing, lack of group discussion, students taking notes or copying from a whiteboard, and student memorisation (Jimakorn and Singhasiri, 2006). Foley (2005), Saengboon, (2002), and Wongsothorn et al (2002) also provide an in-depth critique of English classrooms in Thailand; for instance, they argue that there is too much content in the curriculum, that there is inadequate preparation and teachers are overloaded with responsibilities, and that class sizes are too large and students are not able to achieve the desired standard required for real-life situations. They also describe teacher-fronted styles, an emphasis on accuracy more than fluency, and explanation of grammar rules using only the Thai language. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) also stated that a public university in northern Thailand used a focus-on-forms approach. Teacher-fronted instruction was also found among all teacher participants in Sinprajakpol's (2004) study. Regarding teaching or pedagogical aspects, Wongsothorn (2000) elaborates that the approach to language teaching in Thailand could be described as functional-communicative with an eclectic orientation. This teaching is geared towards learners' autonomy. There are numerous channels to access the students' learning achievements such as portfolios, records, observation, and formal assessment. In Saengboon's (2002) survey of EFL Thai teachers' beliefs about communicative language teaching (CLT), she claimed that the data displayed a style of extreme avoidance which means the teachers in her study did not employ only one teaching approach; rather they employed an integrated approach encompassing different techniques. This study seems to portray the actual situation of teaching in Thailand since the data were collected from a wide range of universities in Thailand, and also a large number of teachers participated in the questionnaire survey.

Problems in language teaching in Thailand

The problem may emerge from how the teachers should teach their students or which is the most appropriate teaching technique in this context which can increase the students' achievement. For a middle-income country, Thailand's TOEFL score is undeniably poor. Thai students' 75 average total TOEFL score in 2010 was below the international average of 80. The section scores for reading, listening, speaking and writing were all below average (see ETS report). English is the least favorite subject among Thai students. The average English test scores between 20-30% in the national standardized O-NET over the past three years mark English as the worst performed subject among primary and secondary Thai school pupils. Shared mother tongue, Thai culture and other

potential assistances in classroom, what may also need to be taken into account is whether they may prove helpful to low motivation and proficiency students. In Wongsothon's and Saengboon's (2000) studies, they suggest that CLT and functional-communicative approaches were adopted and employed by Thai teachers, including grammar translation. These approaches however do not prove or guarantee effective language learning since to the best of my knowledge there have not been any studies about this in the context of low proficiency and motivation students. Regarding CLT, Kaewsanchai (1988) explained that CLT was first introduced into the Thai context in the early 1980s. At that time the Ministry of Education and Ministry of University Affairs realised that the majority of Thai students were not able to communicate in English effectively. This was because the grammar translation teaching approach was prevalent, and it did not promote communicative interactions. The administrators from both ministries and teaching experts from abroad and from Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) were convinced that the use of CLT emphasising language use in real life would solve the low proficiency of Thai students. However, Celce-Murcia et al (1997) criticised this approach and suggested that CLT had a lack of firm linguistic guidelines. Also there was much skepticism as to what kinds of CLT strategies actually work in Asian contexts. Some studies (Nunan, 1987; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Ellis, 1996) argued there were cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of western CLT to Asian contexts.

CLT and SCT in the Thai classroom context

The situation in language teaching and learning in Thailand can be described such as workload, grammar translation and use of mother tongue, low motivation and proficiency students (Wiriyajitra et al, 2002). From the teaching point of view, the problem may emerge from how the teachers should teach their students or which is the most appropriate teaching technique in this context which can increase the students' achievement. Apart from appropriate teaching technique, shared mother tongue, Thai culture and other potential assistances in classroom, what may also need to be taken into account is whether they may prove helpful to low motivation and proficiency students. In Wongsothon et al's (2002) and Saengboon's (2000) studies, they suggest that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and functional-communicative approaches were adopted and employed by Thai teachers, including grammar translation. These approaches however do not prove or guarantee effective language learning since to the best of my knowledge there have not been any studies about this in the context of low proficiency and motivation students.

CLT as a theoretical concept and teaching approach is widely-accepted to be an effective teaching approach because it puts emphasis on communicative competence of learners (Yoon, 2004; Savignon, 1983). Seemingly the communicative competence is ultimately required by language learners worldwide. Most of the studies about CLT have made attempts to see how CLT looks like or what features of CLT have been found in the classroom. Somehow there is much skeptical as to what kinds of strategy of CLT actually work in Asian contexts (Nunan, 1987, p. 137; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Greg Ellis, 1996). For example Ellis (1996) explains in an article about the cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of western CLT to Asian contexts, and he sums that it should have mediation between theoretical aspects of CLT originated in western contexts and eastern teaching practices. Ellis suggests to find points of congruence between contradictory cultural norms. The other suggestion made by Ellis is to show the ability to empathize others' experiences. These constructive suggestions are useful to be addressed in language teaching. Regarding Ellis these suggestions should mediate and highlight both cultures of learners and target language.

Concluding remarks

The focus of the article is to encourage the English language teachers in Thailand to create such an environment or social context in classroom. Thai classroom lacks social context which is crucial to language learning. We propose that CLT is cognitive-oriented. Especially the issue made by researchers and scholars above reflects that CLT does not take into consideration the context of learning. This could cause less awareness of how context is important to language learning. Consequently this may be one of reasons for low proficiency in English of Thai students, especially not able to speak. They lack confidence to speak because of their shy nature and are afraid of making mistakes. The context suggested by SCT should be highly communicated situations which make the students feel comfortable and possess sufficient knowledge and information to share. These contexts may not related to their textbooks (as claimed to be CLT-based); rather it may be personal-oriented and stories of their own communities. Having such a context created, the language teachers need to bear in mind that rapport or reliable relationship between the learners and teachers are required similar to mother-child relationship. We further elaborate that the SCT encompasses a number of concept which explain learning such as language socialization, scaffolding. Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) states that language socialization research is concerned with how children are socialized through the use of language and how they are socialized to use the language. We may conclude my article that SCT may be an appropriate theoretical framework which consists of concepts of internalization, zone of proximal development, language socialization, etc.

We believe based on SCT framework language teaching and learning in the Thai context should be effectively facilitated. This is because SCT emphasises the context and culture of learning of Thai students. SCT also offers an approach for socialized situations to create language use which is indeed important to Thai students a great deal due to lacks of natural foreign language exposure in the country.

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