

## A Review of Sociocultural Theory and Language Teaching

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### Abstract

The main focus of sociocultural theory in language teaching is to engage learners in knowledge creation through social interaction. It underlines the assumption that learners can develop language proficiency not by memorising the rule of grammar and vocabulary, but by interacting, collaborating, and scaffolding in the particular socio-cultural context where a particular language is used. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of sociocultural theory in language teaching, particularly second language teaching. The article aims to review sociocultural theory along with its major components like the zone of proximal development and scaffolding, and how they support language teaching and learning. Moreover, it also analyses the role of scaffolding, interaction, and collaboration in developing children's language which clarifies the implication of sociocultural theory in language teaching. Since the nature of this paper is documentary analysis, I reviewed several articles related to this theory to see how sociocultural theory is associated with the language classroom in various contexts. This paper found that sociocultural theory emphasised learning connecting to social, cultural, and historical artifacts that can play a significant role in learners' cognitive development, and language teaching should be associated with making learning experiences relevant to the learners' context.

**Keywords:** Sociocultural theory, the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, social interaction, collaboration

### Introduction

Sociocultural theory, an emerging psychological theory developed by Vygotsky, emphasises the role of social interaction and sociocultural settings as the influencing factors in the development of higher forms of human mental activities such as problem-solving, logical thinking, and intentional memory. The most remarkable work of Vygotsky in sociocultural theory is the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Amerian *et al.*, 2014) [3], which is the gap between the existing knowledge of a person and the knowledge or skills that the person will gain with the support of more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Rahmatirad, 2020) [24]. The adults who possess more experience and knowledge can assist children to perform various activities by giving instruction and facilitation. Thus, learners can develop a better understanding and construct knowledge through interaction and collaboration with MKO and more competent peers, and gradually they internalise the skill to become independent learners. Vygotsky suggests scaffolding as an effective technique to support and encourage the learners when they face challenges to carry out various tasks (Kozulin, 1999) [15]. Language, an effective tool for social interaction, is essential for the cognitive development of learners. A child develops language skills by engaging in various sociocultural activities where he gets many opportunities for social interaction. Some studies (Chirkov, 2020; Panhwar *et al.*, 2016; Shabani, 2016) [4, 21, 29] on sociocultural theory and language teaching suggest that the theory contributes to developing communicative skills since learners practise language skills in context through scaffolding. It promotes student-centered learning to develop learner autonomy. Following sociocultural theory in language teaching, a teacher can facilitate students to use the target language while respecting their cultural values. Various

activities including interactive learning, learning in collaboration, and task-based learning can promote learners' linguistic and pragmatic skills. These activities enable children to co-construct knowledge (Vuopala *et al.*, 2019) [31], not simply memorise the grammar rules and vocabulary. Thus, sociocultural theory can develop effective language pedagogy.

The present paper tends to critically review sociocultural theory in language teaching. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of sociocultural theory in language teaching, particularly second language teaching. The article aims to review the theory along with its major components like the zone of proximal development and scaffolding and how they support language teaching and learning. After reviewing various articles related to sociocultural theory and language teaching, the paper underlines the use of the theory in language teaching with various themes including theories of language teaching and learning, learning with scaffolding, learning through interaction, collaborative learning, the implication of sociocultural theory in language teaching and teacher's role in language teaching. Since second language teachers in developing countries may follow structure-based methods such as the audio-lingual method and grammar-translation method, this article can be significant to encourage them to adopt sociocultural theory in second language teaching. Similarly, many studies have been carried out on Vygotsky's theory of education. However, sociocultural theory in language teaching, particularly in second language teaching is a less researched area. So, the article can be useful for future studies in this field.

### An Overview of Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory, originally developed by Vygotsky

(1978), stresses the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Vygotsky views the social construction of knowledge as possible through interaction between people and the culture in which they live (Pathan *et al.*, 2018) [22]. As learning is a social process, learners co-construct knowledge through dialogue and interaction with social and individual worlds. Culture and cultural artifacts influence an individual's cognitive development and learning process (Lantolf, 2000). Similarly, the mental and educational development of a person is linked to the socio-cultural and historical context in which he/she is grown up.

For Vygotsky, language is a powerful tool for cognitive development and intellectual adaptation. In the beginning, a child talks to himself to guide his thoughts. This process of talking is called private speech (Pathan *et al.*, 2018) [22]. Gradually, when the child tries to speak, he gets support from his parents or the adult around him, more knowledgeable others (MKO) (Abtahi, 2017) [2]. Parents, who have more information about the culture and the channel through which the culture passes to the child, give instructions through language. In this way, a child acquires knowledge and learns language through social interaction with people in the first step, and then he internalises this knowledge adding his value to it. This transition from social to personal property according to Vygotsky is not only a copy, but a transformation of what he had learned through interaction into personal values (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006) [6].

The sociocultural theory, a holistic approach to learning, focuses on meaning as the central aspect of teaching in an integrated form, rather than a discrete concept (Fahim & Haghani, 2012) [12]. Learners can construct meaning and solve problems in their learning process. To make them able to generate meaning, they receive regular support from adults and peers who are more competent. The assumption on which the theory is based is that learning develops not through interaction but in interaction (Ellis, 2000) [9]. First, learners perform certain tasks with the support of the teacher and another learner, then they internalise the way to accomplish a similar task themselves. Thus, learning is the product of the interaction between the learners and MKO. Vygotsky introduced components like ZPD and scaffolding to facilitate learners in the knowledge creation process including language learning (Scott & Palincsar, 2013) [28].

### Zone of Proximal Development

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the difference between what a learner can learn without support from others and what the same learner can learn with the help or guidance from adults or knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1997) [32]. It is a gap between the existing knowledge of a person and the knowledge or skills that the person will gain with the support of others. The concept of ZPD as suggested by Shabani (2016) [29] implies that a less competent person (a learner, novice, etc.) gets involved in developmental changes through interaction with a more experienced and competent other like a teacher, mentor, and observer. ZPD fills the gap between learners' inability to do something independently and the assistance from the more experienced ones. Daniels (2016) [5] argues that the reason behind some students lagging in academic performance is because of the inappropriate instruction given to them by their teachers. So clear instruction can guide the learners to solve their problems.

### Scaffolding

The term scaffolding refers to the support that an adult, a

more experienced person assists a child to carry out a task that the same child might not perform on his/her own. A child may feel comfortable accomplishing a task, solving a problem, or attaining a goal through scaffolding. In the process of scaffolding, first, the adult lets the child play with the task for a while and only mediates when the child gets into difficulty performing the task and needs support (Muhayimana, 2017) [20]. Scaffolding, in the field of teaching and learning process, is about learning with the help of an adult or in collaboration with more knowledgeable peers. For Ellis (2003) [10], scaffolding is "the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone" (P. 180). In course of learning, when some children face difficulty to carry out an activity, a teacher clarifies the problem or gives some examples related to the problem, and the children can find ways to accomplish the task that they would not have completed if they had been left alone (Lee, 2015) [19]. Similarly, various activities like collaborative learning, peers work and group work, and group discussion can promote the learners' learning process by encouraging them to support each other.

### Theories of Language Teaching and Learning

Several psychological theories in language teaching have their assumptions regarding language teaching and learning. For example, the behaviourists like Skinner and Watson emphasise memorisation and language drills through the audio-lingual method and grammar-translation method (Eun & Lim, 2009) [11]. Cognitivism, on the other hand, highlights the role of a child's mind in language learning and learners' inherent ability to acquire language. The cognitivist including Piaget, Chomsky, and Krashen find that the roots of language acquisition are solely in biological function, and language learning takes place not from the external input, but within the child's mind (Piaget, 1971) [23]. Unlike the above-stated theories, the sociocultural theory led by Vygotsky emphasises the importance of context in language learning which integrates individuals' nature and social elements in the learning process. Negotiation and creation of meaning in language acquisition is possible through a collaborative act, not an individual effort, and a child learns from an adult or more capable peer through support, interaction, and use of multiple tools including language (Vygotsky, 1980) [33]. It underlines the role of interaction, collaboration, and scaffolding in language learning.

### Sociocultural Theory and Language Teaching

The sociocultural theory of language teaching, particularly second language teaching prioritises the co-construction of knowledge through the students' experience in their sociocultural contexts. The teachers need to generate methods and techniques of teaching incorporating the learners' needs situated in the local contexts since the contents may vary from context to context. Therefore, Kumaravadivelu (2001) [16] views that all methods are locally constructed and are socio-politically adoptable. The teachers need to invest their time in respecting the individual and social differentiation to cope with everyone's needs and goals.

Studies on sociocultural theory concerning language pedagogy have suggested various techniques to develop students' language skills. For instance, emphasising the role of the first language (L1) in learning the second language (L2), Vygotsky (1987) [34] argued that bilingual instruction help the learners to understand the concept in L2 learning as the learning of L2 has its foundation in the knowledge of one's L1

and it enhances their cognitive development. Similarly, Vygotsky focused on the importance of pragmatic competence in language development because pragmatic competence enables the learners to use language appropriately in context. Likewise, Eun and Lim (2009) <sup>[11]</sup> suggested some techniques such as bilingual instruction, and inclusive learning environment, a focus on pragmatics, and instruction based on children's interest to implement the sociocultural theory in language teaching. Moreover, Panhwar *et al.* (2016) <sup>[21]</sup> investigated the ways how sociocultural theory develops language pedagogies. They further argued that sociocultural theory develops communicative competence of the students through scaffolding, and promotes student-centered learning by establishing learner autonomy. Reviewing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in second language acquisition, Pathan *et al.* (2018) <sup>[22]</sup> highlighted a significant role of social, cultural, and historical artifacts in the children's cognitive development and their potential performance.

### Learning through Scaffolding

Regarding the implementation of the scaffolding technique in language teaching, several studies show that scaffolding helps to increase the learners' achievement and can contribute to cognitive development. For example, Donato (2000) <sup>[7]</sup> argued that peer scaffolding assists the linguistic development of individual learners who can expand their L2 knowledge to promote their peers' language development. Similarly, Donovan and Smolkin (2002) <sup>[8]</sup> suggested not to interpret scaffolding as direct instruction because misunderstanding scaffolding may lead to counterproductive hindering of learners' development. Likewise, Rezaei (2012) <sup>[26]</sup> found that scaffolding supported the students to develop writing skills in Iranian schools. Compared teacher scaffolding with peer scaffolding, she reported that teacher scaffolding could be more effective than peer scaffolding. It shows that learners need to be taught about the way of scaffolding as the scaffolding procedures can determine its effectiveness. In a different context, Amerian *et al.* (2014) <sup>[3]</sup> reported that the performance of the students who were benefitted from the scaffolding techniques performed better than those who did their tasks individually.

### Learning through Interaction

Learners can learn a language effectively through interaction. Classroom interaction can create a good environment for successful language learning where learners are likely to actively engage in the learning process and construct meaning through interaction with the teachers and among themselves during the teaching and learning process. For the last few decades, many researchers and practitioners have highlighted the essence of classroom interaction both the teacher-learner and student-student interaction, dialogue, and meaning negotiation which constitutes the essence of learning (Samana, 2013; Xia, 2014) <sup>[23, 35]</sup>. Thus, several factors like classroom interaction, dialogue, idea sharing, support, collaboration, and meaning negotiation can contribute to effective teaching and learning in the language classroom (Muhayimana, 2017) <sup>[20]</sup>.

In the context of second language learning, students can develop their proficiency in using language by interacting with other people including language teachers and peer groups in the target language. The regular involvement of students in oral interaction in context can enable the students to use various forms and functions of language effectively. Eun and Lim (2009) <sup>[11]</sup> suggested that interactive activities

such as reading group discussions across the content areas, sharing views on different contemporary issues, dialogue journals, and performing different roles in drama can develop teacher-student and student-student interactions, both oral and written forms.

### Collaborative Learning Environment

Learning in collaboration with each other can be an effective technique for language development. Razak *et al.* (2013) <sup>[25]</sup> stated that most of the EFL classrooms in developing countries tend to lack the necessary learning environment to engage learners in active participation and dynamic interaction to use English for various purposes. Due to the lack of favourable learning environment, the majority of the students may lack the opportunity to interact and collaborate actively in classroom activities. To mitigate such problems and promote collaborative learning in second language classrooms through social and cultural processes and interactions, Abate (2015) <sup>[1]</sup> suggested several types of tools such as diaries, posters, and information sharing tasks including jigsaw, information gap, problem-solving, role-play, etc. Earlier, Kumaravadivelu (2003) <sup>[17]</sup> underlined the importance of collaborative learning in language teaching whereby teachers encouraged the students to speak much by negotiating for talk management and topic management. All the above literature shows that language teaching and learning collaboratively can promote students' learning capacity which is one of the main strategies of sociocultural theory.

### Teachers' Role in Sociocultural Theory

To engage students in meaningful interaction, teachers can play a significant role as a mediator. The teachers should be familiar with the potential differences that exist in students' sociocultural backgrounds and those found in the schools. Following the mediational processes, teachers guide the students to use the target language respecting the cultural mediational patterns of students and their styles of learning (Eun & Lim, 2009) <sup>[11]</sup>. Earlier, Vygotsky (1997) <sup>[32]</sup> emphasised that teachers can play the role of "director of the social environment" (p.339) in the dynamic process of language teaching and learning. He used the metaphor of gardeners to illustrate the role of teachers as gardeners would not directly affect the growth of their plants by pulling at the roots from the undergrounds, teachers should not directly influence the educational process by transforming knowledge to their students. Like the gardeners, the teachers should create a good social environment and nurture their students as back supporters and facilitators. Moreover, the teacher should consider the learners' needs, interests, and purpose while selecting the subject matters in a second language teaching classroom.

### The Implication of Sociocultural Theory on Language Teaching and Learning

Students can learn a language effectively through interaction, collaboration, and association with sociocultural contexts, not by learning the rules of grammar, rote-learning the vocabulary and pronunciation. Regarding language teaching and learning, especially second language teaching, Vygotsky's ideas support the process approach which came as a reaction to the product approach (Turuk, 2008) <sup>[30]</sup>. The product approach is based on the behaviouristic theory of language learning which emphasises language teaching to linguistic forms, habit formation, and discrete linguistic skills. But, the process approach which focuses on the cognitive aspect of learning

with systematic thinking skills (Horowitz, 1986) <sup>[13]</sup> is associated with the sociocultural theory of language teaching. It focuses on the co-constructing of knowledge based on socio-cultural context and practices where the language is used, not simply transferring the theories of second language acquisition (Johnson, 2009) <sup>[14]</sup>. Thus, sociocultural theory in language teaching can be applied through collaborating teaching, peer tutoring and reciprocal teaching, scaffolding learners' efforts, interactive learning through group work and peer work, and teaching through a learner-centered approach.

### Conclusion

The paper concludes with the idea that the sociocultural theory is necessary for the cognitive development of a child in language learning. The theory may have a great place in the field of education, psychology, and applied linguistics, particularly in second language teaching compared to other psychological theories including behaviourism and cognitivism. Language learning focusing on the social, cultural, and historical artifacts can play an important role in a child's cognitive development which contributes to his/her potential performance. More specifically, concepts like ZPD, learning through scaffolding, social interaction, collaboration, and learning as a mediated process are the most influential thoughts of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which are used and practised in language teaching.

The educational implication of sociocultural theory, in particular, the notion of ZPD would suggest that the goal of educational assessment should be to identify the learners' abilities that are in the process of development and to predict the learners' future potentiality he/she will do independently. For this, teachers are responsible to create learning contexts respecting the sociocultural background of the learners in which social interaction takes place between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge. This involves scaffolding the learners to carry out given tasks with clear instruction by the teachers and knowledgeable peers that encourages and promotes their learning abilities to be independent learners in the future. Finally, several studies related to sociocultural theory and language teaching suggest that various techniques including bilingual instruction, dialogue, group discussion, peer work and group work, reading group discussion across the content areas, diaries journals, etc. can promote the concept of student-centered learning to establish learners' autonomy. The L2 teachers need to invest their time in respecting the individual and social differentiation to cope with everyone's needs and goals as a facilitator.

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