

A Study of Foreign Language Classroom from the Perspective of Social Culture

Yu Xiaohong

Eastern Liaoning University, Liaoning Dandong, China, 118000

Keywords: foreign language classroom; sociocultural theory; ideas; themes; methods;

Abstract: This paper first focuses on the sociocultural theories of intermediation, internalization, proximal development zone, scaffolding, activity theory and initiative. Then, this paper explores the research topics from the perspectives of teachers and learners and concludes them. Combining with the current research situation, this paper deeply analyses the research scope of each topic which can be further expanded in the future.

1. Introduction

Studies began in the 1960s to answer questions about the role of teaching in second language acquisition ^[1]. The study of foreign language classroom in China is guided by psycholinguistic theories. However, complexity of language learning in context and the variability of its influencing factors have gained more observation and understanding. Since the late 1970s, a large number of sociocultural theories have emerged in the field of second language acquisition. Since the 21st century, the research of SCT has turned to the second language teaching. Vygotsky emphasized the dialectical combination of theory and practice in educational reform ^[2]. Lantolf and his research team published a large number of related research results which has become the main force in promoting second language teaching under the guidance of SCT ^[3]. Despite domestic second language practices, the research also shows a shift of SCT perspective, but the application and practical research of SCT in foreign language classroom is scarce. Based on this, this paper attempts to focus on the main aspects of SCT. Ideas and research topics of SCT-based foreign language classroom research are sorted out, explained and explored in order to stimulate students' interest.

2. Multidimensional Core Ideas

2.1 Mediation and Internalization

SCT comes from cultural and historical psychology founded by Vygotsky. Lantolf & Thorne and other scholars introduced it into the field of applied linguistics, which has been continuously expanded by scholars ^[4]. With deepening, a relatively complete new SCT system has been formed.

Vygotsky holds that all forms of psychological activity in advanced social history are, first of all, acted as the form of external activity and then internalized into internal activity in the mind. External activities of learners are social and cultural products as intermediaries, using physical tools (such as material media) to transform the external world and using psychological tools (such as

linguistic symbols, concepts) to understand the world and learners' internal activities need experience. From relying on external cultural products or more competent ones to relying on others to help complete activities, the process of external help and independent completion of tasks is the process of gradual internalization. This explains the nature of learning. It also reveals the interaction between individual learners and the external environment. The development of physiological function can be divided into three stages from low to high: object regulation, other regulation and self-regulation. Ohta who divides the learning process of foreign language into three parts: object regulation, other regulation and self-regulation, found that the phenomena in each stage accord with Vygotsky's advanced psychological function development^[5]. Jiang Rong also found that low-level learners tend to adopt object-mediated and others-mediated, while intermediate-level learners use other-mediated and self-regulated vocabulary when exploring the cognitive mechanism of learners' foreign language vocabulary acquisition^[6]. The output is the best, and the high-level can use three modes of adjustment freely. Researchers use "internalization" generalizations. The interpretation of classroom teaching mode is also more convincing. On the basis of reflective practice, learners will acquire language knowledge, information resources and other external branches in classroom interaction. Perceptions brought about by persistence and interactions are gradually integrated into the internalization process of its own cognitive system: low-level learning. In the classroom, the learner gradually realizes the interior by means of external media, or others with strong ability or rich experience. To achieve self-control is to achieve learning goals, but once the difficulty of classroom learning increases, it goes beyond learners. In terms of ability range, he will borrow object regulation or other regulation again, such as seeking help from others and consulting reference books and so on, the individual psychological process turns back into the process of interpersonal society, the process of internalization develops dynamically and spirally. This provides a strong motivation for the classroom interactive teaching model from the perspective of SCT. It is clear that interactive negotiation, creative imitation and whispering are the more common learning internalization means for learners.

2.2 Proximal Development Zone and Scaffolding

The zone of proximal development refers to the distance between the actual level of development and the potential level of development. The actual development level refers to the learner's ability to solve problems independently, and the potential development level refers to the learner's ability to solve problems in the outside world. The learners' level of accomplishing tasks under the guidance of mediation tools depend on when they arrive at potential development zones. The intermediary aids provided by parents, teachers, peers and others are scaffolds, proximal development zone and bracket. It reveals the social and cultural characteristics of cognitive development and shows that teaching and cooperation are of great importance to learning. The main goal of classroom teaching is to provide students with a framework as far as possible to help them succeed in leaping over proximal developments. As a result, the theory of proximal development zone and scaffolding is often used to explain foreign language classes. Documents show that there are more studies on the support of teachers or peers. The function of stent has been discussed^[7]. Li Danli's research shows that teacher's support function is more manifested in the maintenance of established goals and feedback^[8]; Xu Jinfen found the peer support^[9]. The role is mainly reflected in seven aspects, such as improving participation and providing vocabulary. In short, scaffolding can help learners choose or change the environmental conditions of task presentation, reducing task difficulty and reducing learner's cognitive load, etc. Although proximal development and scaffolding theory have better explanatory power for classroom interaction, some studies often assume that the zone of proximal development is the starting point, which exists in learners' minds

long ago. Few experimental studies have been conducted on how to measure the endpoint characteristics, which should be the direction of follow-up research. In addition, in foreign language classroom practice, scaffolding can be divided into interactive scaffolding mediated by interpersonal relationship and tool-based scaffolds (e.g. computer multimedia) mediated by technology or tools.

2.3 Activity Theory and Initiative

As it is shown in figure 1, based on the core idea of Vygotsky's individual cognitive development and social practice, the elements in the cultural environment are integrated into an activity system consisting of three core elements (subject, object and community) and three minor elements (tools, rules and division of labour) [10]. Mediation acts on the object (goal) and ultimately transforms the goal into the result. Initiative refers to participating in social activities and seeking. The will, motivation and choice of the subject seeking individual development are the choice and control of the subject in pursuit of its own goals. And the expression of self-regulation ability enables people to imagine, accept, perform new roles or identities and take concrete actions to pursue their goals. Foreign language classroom teaching has the main characteristics of the above-mentioned activity system. Learners as the main body of classroom activities take foreign language learning objectives as objects. Teachers, students in the learning community in accordance with classroom rules and division of labour engage in learning activities using teaching materials, media equipment and other tools for the media. Literature review found that foreign research focused on learning motivation, orientation and strategy of participants' participation in activities which are mostly empirical studies. However, task-based teaching is more common in foreign language classrooms in China. Although the history of social and cultural turn in foreign language classroom research is not very long, SCT is applied in foreign language classroom research. It opens up a new horizon and shows a multi-dimensional trend in foreign language classroom research from the perspective of SCT.

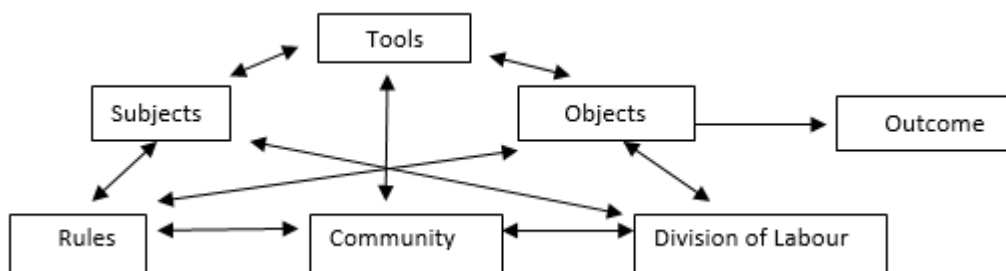


Figure 1 Outline of Activity Theory (Engeström 1987)

3. Multidimensional Research Topics

3.1 Teacher's Role

Foreign language classroom is a complex and dynamic system, in which learners and teachers constitute the human factors. The social environment consists of interpersonal (teacher-student, peer) relationships and rules and systems, as well as teaching material resources and multimedia. Teachers, learners and classroom, social and material environments are three common themes of foreign language classroom research from the SCT perspective.

The study of foreign language teachers from the perspective of SCT mainly involves the roles of teachers and their specialties in classroom teaching. According to SCT researchers, the essence of

foreign language learning lies in its social practicality as a classroom learning process. Teachers are not only supervisors of cultural input and output of target language, but also supervisors of classroom social relations, the constructor and maintainer, the designer of classroom activities and the evaluator of classroom effects. Regardless of learner's foreign language proficiency, teachers play an important role in promoting the formation and development of learners' language competence. However, if teachers play an excessive role in the regulation of others, they will not only trap learners entering the passive learning state but also deprive them of the opportunity to think independently making them feel dependent, which is not conducive to their cognition. With the development of learners' abilities, it is difficult for learners to achieve their goal of self-regulation. The teachers' help enables learners to learn by choosing, adapting and explaining content and process providing them with purposeful, meaningful, and transferable intermediary learning to other situations. The experience helps to solve the problem that learners cannot directly contact the target language. Teachers can also be supportive by creating emotional environment which helps learners to realize the transition from other's regulation to self-regulation. It can be seen that foreign language teachers are the "intermediary" rather than the "subject" in the learner's activity system which brings about the role orientation of foreign language teachers in the classroom. Beneficial enlightenment is that teachers should abide by students' subject status in designing classroom activities and creating social and cultural environment in foreign language classroom. Subject status should not be "anti-guest-oriented". In the classroom, meaning negotiation, form negotiation and content negotiation and other forms of teaching should complement each other and give full play to the moderating role of teachers.

3.2 Learning Strategies

Early research on learning strategies focuses on learners' encoding, memory or information processing in foreign language learning. However, these studies are mainly conducted within the theoretical framework of cognitive psychology. With the expansion of SCT's influence, scholars began to pay attention to the social and cultural characteristics of learning strategies. The paper can be regarded as a representative of SCT-based foreign language learning strategies. It seems that the cultivation of foreign language learners' cognitive and linguistic competence depends on their social and cultural background and learning environment. The learners' awareness of learning strategies and their choice and use is formed as the result of interaction between human and social cultural environment. Gao found that learning context is a strategy for learners which has a profound impact. Data show that in a competitive environment, participants in the pursuit of ideal identity have to adopt exam-oriented learning strategies in their study^[11]. The empirical study of Derakhti et al shows that learning strategies in foreign language classrooms are influenced by factors such as professional classroom environment, learning subjects and learning partners, and the strategies used by learners are dynamic, and the types and ways of using strategies will change constantly^[12]. The study of foreign language learning strategies based on SCT has broadened people's horizons, but future research also faces how to define foreign language learning strategies in SCT framework and how to integrate the cognitive and social characteristics of learning strategies.

4. Conclusion

Second language research from the perspective of SCT has become mature in the world, but it is still in the process of introduction and preliminary study in China. This paper reviews the literature of foreign language classroom research in recent years from the perspective of SCT and introduces the SCT related theories commonly used in foreign language classroom research, and probes into the relevant research topics. However, due to space constraints, there are still many related issues

that have not been discussed in depth. There will be more scholars and teachers in the future to devote themselves to the application and practical research of SCT in the foreign language classroom environment of China, enriching the foundation of SCT.

Acknowledgements

Youth Project of Eastern Liaoning University "Peer Scaffolding in Interaction from the Perspective of Social Culture"(2017QN033)

References

- [1] Ellis, R. 1990. *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [2] Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [3] Lantolf, J. P. & S. L. Thorne. 2006. *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Lantolf, J. P. 2012. *Sociocultural theory and L2*. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 28(1): 67-110.
- [5] Ohta, A. S. 2001. *Second Language Acquisition Processes in the Classroom: Learning Japanese*.
- [6] Jiang, Rong. 2013. *A study on the cognitive mechanism of Chinese language learners in vocabulary acquisition*. *Language Teaching and Research* (1): 9-15.
- [7] Storch, N. 2011. *Collaborative writing in L2 contexts: Processes, outcomes, and future directions*. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 31: 275-288.
- [8] Li, Danli . 2012. *The construction of teacher scaffolding in ESL classroom discourse Interaction*. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (4) : 572-584.
- [9] Xu, Jinfen & Cao, Zhongkai. 2012. *The influence of different pairing patterns on the student - student interaction in college English class: An empirical study*. *Foreign Languages in China* (5): 67-77.
- [10] Engeström, Y. 1987. *Learning by Expanding: An Activity Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.
- [11] Gao, X. 2008. *You had to work hard 'cause you didn't know whether you were going to wear shoes or straw sandals!* *Journal of Language Identity and Education* (7): 169-187.
- [12] Derakhti, F. M., M. Sharififar & R. P. Moghimizade. 2015. *The study on the role of reading comprehension strategy Instruction on English reading comprehension among intermediate students*. *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods* 5(3): 75-87.