IMPACT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY IN ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Socio-cultural theory is a powerful theory for teaching and learning English in ESL class room. It believes that learning English as a Second language should be a helpful deed not an unmediated process.It insists that instruction and interaction is a very crucial process for L2 development in ESL classroom. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) ensures learner's socio-cultural growth. This research paper examines socio-cultural theory in ESL classroom and its implementation in realistic teaching life.

Key words: ESL, Zone of Proximal Development, Mediation, Socio-cultural theory etc.

Introduction

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is a significant concept for learning and teaching process. It insists on L2 skills development based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development. But this theory does not involve on the methods which could not be taught to a child. In 1962 Vygotsky in his theory stated that if the teacher takes up direct teaching of the concepts without explanation, it will be futile. So, the teachers resort to repetition method which results in the memorization of the concepts. A child should be taught by some rules, instructions and activities that are included in ZPD method. Besides, this theory includes cultural method as well as educational method. This is beneficial for young learners as it teaches social interaction, cultural participation and all the components required for an effective teaching environment. Teacher-talk and Student-talk should be ensured along with the other criteria in an ESL classroom. A teacher should be consistent and use the same set of words for instructions to all the students. (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 40)

Socio-cultural theory explains how an individual psychic functioning is related to cultural, institutional and historical context. For a L2 trainer, the socio-cultural setting of an ESL classroom should be planned according to problem solving, involving students into mental activities and influencing them to think logically. This paper projects pertinent theories related to socio-cultural theory through which students can be motivated, elevate interest in their learning process and their mindset during their interaction with the teachers. It insists on the effective measures of socio-cultural process of young learners and how the trainer should frame the curriculum based on the needs of the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zone of Proximal Development:

One of the components of Zone of Proximal Development is related to social interaction which is a vital period for cognitive development. Friendly interaction with students yields effective results in their L2

learning process. This brings out the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what a learner can achieve with guidance and encouragement from the trainer. Vygotsky found the importance of social communication for human cognitive development and for human psychological capabilities, "first, on the social level and later, on the individual level, first inter-psychological and then intra-psychological". (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57) His socio-cultural theory has two preferential criteria:

Cognitive development that focuses on cultural and social interaction and

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

ZPD is the significant area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance should be given. Learners self development of higher mental functions is based on ZPD method. In the words of Vygotsky children learn from their surroundings and from their interaction with others.

Vygotsky's theory insists the role of the teachers. As teaching profession is about mentoring the learners Vygotsky perceives that the future of learners depends on proper supervision of the teachers. For this reason he formulatedZone of Proximal Development. He describes, "the distance between a learner's actual development level determined by independent problem solving and the higher level potential development through problem solving under trainer guidance or in collaboration with able peers". (Wertsch 1985, p. 60) Warford (2011) describes Zone of Proximal Development as Zone of Proximal Teacher Development that explains the differences between taking assistance and not taking it. Learners who take ZPD with trainers help are identified to be more capable compared to those who do it on their own. Klem, A.M., and Connell, J.P defined two components in this issue – "ongoing engagement and reaction to challenge". Ongoing engagement concentrates on the student's behaviour, feeling, thoughts and emotions at school and includes their concentration on interacting with peers and trainers to focus on task. In contrast to that reaction to challenge is the area where learners be going to copy, deviate, fail, can't solve problems and unable to use strategic thinking. (Donato 2000) Besides L2 learning by impassive learners can't be constructive. This process is asymmetrical and ZPD is evolving. (Yu, 2004)

Learners learning English as L2 are devoted to their mother tongue. So when the teachers emphasize L1 in teaching L2 it will stimulate more emphasis on their learning in an ESL classroom. Vygotsky noted that the process of social interaction varies from "individual to individual and indeed across time periods for specific individuals" (Lantolf& Thorne, 2006). Henceforth, the skill performed with assistance is called as individual ZPD.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is another process used by the trainers for solving learner problems and supports their point of view during their difficult times while performing the tasks. Donato claims that this theory develops cognitive growth of the learners. Learners with strong social interactions can extend their knowledge and reach the top of their profession. In institutional perspective, scaffolding is an instructional structure followed by the trainers. This shifts to the learners increasingly. According to Mckenzie scaffolding provides:

a)   Clear instructions for learners
b)   Simplifies the purpose of the task
c)   Maintains learners' attention
d)   Assess expectations
e)   Directs learners to worthy sources
f)   Reduces ambiguity, disbelief and disappointment
g)   Creates enthusiasm

For L2 learning Leo Van Lier invented six fold scaffolding. They are:

Context – Challenging atmosphere is required for this kind of support. Mistakes are expected and accepted in teaching and learning language.

Persistence – Repetitions of the occurrences for difficult tasks is a must and maintains a firm position between routine and differences.

Inter subjectivity–Mutual support is necessary where two minds work together and perform the task.

Flow – interaction between the learner and the trainer must not be a forceful one. It should be natural and tasks must be fun oriented.

Contingency – scaffolding depends on the perception the learners. So, from learners' responses, the components of the learning process can be added, altered, deleted, etc.

Handover – Zone of Proximal Development comes to an end once the learners are ready to solve new tasks without any help.

Mediation

Mediation is analogous idea to the socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky's concept of learning language creates the path of social mediation that conducts social interaction and helps to learn L2. Besides, it is a social movement that is connected with 'human to the world of objects or psychic behaviour.' (Lantolf&Appel, 1994) In this connection Wertsch stated that human's interaction should be mediated with physical or psychological tool with the help of language. Moreover, language learning and acquisition are interactional procedure mediated by a trainer. To Lantolf and Throne speaking and writing skills can be conducted as a "meditational tool". Mediation is a specific approach that transforms the trainer to a Specialist from "culturally constructed auxiliary means."

Implementation of Theories into practice

I have been working as English language trainer to the engineering students for the past twelve years. I teach effective communication and creating writing to the students. I have been continuously observing the students psyche, try to interact with them in the suitable way and making their learning interesting. In the previous academic year my focus was on implementing socio-cultural perspective in the classroom.

Preparation of lesson plans and classroom observation

Handling creative writing and language classes for the class which is dominant with rural background students was quiet challenging for me in the beginning. It took some time to understand the pattern of the learners' learning and the general idea of the lesson plan followed. I observed the void between the anticipated standards of the university and the lesson plans followed by the colleges. One of the significant findings of my observation was that students were not interested, excited or motivated for the class. Most of the students were not interactive with the trainers. It is stated that socio-cultural theory gives "dynamic interaction, interrelation and interconnection" (Ajayi 2008) with trainers and helps learners in finding their mistakes.

The training was taking place in a more traditional manner. The trainer hands over a sheet containing a picture and instructs them two write a story not exceeding fifteen to twenty lines. The learners were quite confused, and the trainer didn't try to understand their confusion. The learners were nervous and they were not in a position to question it. They were scared and thinking that they would be punished if they question their lack of understanding of the concept. It is clear that they are used to rote learning. Simister (2004) states that repetition of recognized words or ideas will produce dull, depressed and passive learners. Only few students could finish the story writing and the trainer appreciates them.

a) From the second week of training sessions I used the soft copy with numbers from 1 to 60. By clicking on each number the students will get a picture, quote or a word for their imaginative writing.

b) If there is a picture of marriage they have to narrate the traditional marriage process imagining them as a part of the ceremony. Or they will narrate the marriage process of one of their household members.

If there is a statement like "if I were a tree" – what would be his/her thoughts and how she/he could convey them in the funniest way possible. I was in dilemma in the beginning thinking that whether I could grab the attention the students or not. But students were curious and interestingly participated compared to traditional classroom atmosphere. Kozulin et al. (1995) claimed that learning process is not an unsocial assessment, but it is a process where learners can relate their social environment, their culture with interesting tools or exciting plays. Students were laughing and became enthusiastic to know their concept and they were given freedom to clear their doubts through their questions. Conversation with me helped them to interact in L2 about the concept without any nervousness. According to Vygotsky teaching is a profession in which techniques should be interactive between the teacher and the learner and learning could

be done with active process like dialogues, questioning, rephrasing etc. Teemant, Leland and Berghoff witnessed that English learners' need more care for academic knowledge elevation. They need "hybrid identities, competence in reading, challenging assumptions and agentive in the face of inequities.

In my ESL class students are allowed to interact with their friends and encouraging conditions are provided to express their point of view with new vocabulary and new sentence structures. Swain &Lapkin claimed that communication and writing skills are perceived from cognitive development that helps learners to distinguish, convey, re-socialize etc. These are the qualities that construct and deconstruct and regulate their knowledge. Vygotsky explained that understanding is a cultural procedure and learning is social. L2 learners' involvement in learning like thinking, knowing are connected with the activities and tasks that appears from socio-cultural development. Method applied for L2 acquisition and the learning process were –

a) Zone of Proximal Development
b) Mediation
c) Scaffolding

Acquiring Socio-cultural perspective in other ways

Socio-cultural perspective of a native student might not get success if Vygotsky's theory is not implemented appropriately. Group work is primary requisite for the implementation of Vygotsky's theory. Group work can be accomplished in different ways. They are –

a) Peer to peer
b) Face to face interaction
c) Family
d) Community
e) Interactive activities
f) Individual

Peer to peer

In this process learners can work in pairs or in small group. In this learners will have an opportunity to interact and share their innovative ideas, develop their L2 learning, perceptions and point of view. They shouldn't have the fear to come to school. They should be free to question and put forward their ideas. They should be motivated to listen to their peers. Trainers should identify learners' needs and provide skilful activities. For example - worksheets given on cultural facts of different countries like dollar, rupee, euro etc. These help trainers to think, relate and encourage learners to learn. This method transforms a trainer into a social agent rather than a mere mental processing entity that acts on stimuli in the teaching atmosphere.

Face to face discussion

Face to face discussion reduces the anxiety.Learners can gain more confidence through face to face conversations and qualifies to draw together knowledge. So, trainers should have meetings either weekly or monthly with learners and have friendly interaction in L2. This creates effective atmosphere among students and will be free in their internal discussions in L2. They can share their personal feelings, anxiety, eagerness, dreams, difficulties etc. These reduce social obligations and understand more the socio-cultural factors. Face to face discussion is the easiest way to find out the problems in ESL learning and to introduce socio-cultural perspective to students.

Family

Family plays a prominent role in teaching children socio-cultural facts. Activities can be planned to include the parents of the students for comfortable learning as students are more comfortable with their parents initially. For example – during family movie time students can learn socio-cultural factors based on the context projected through the movie and present their learning in the ESL class in different learning patterns. Further, knowledge can be constructed, reconstructed between participants in specific contexts through the medium of cultural artefacts at their disposal as they work in collaboration. (Wells, 1999) The members of the family should be used as component individuals to assist individuals to assist the students, increasing their ZPD. This emphasizes Vygotsky's theory which claims that strong connection with family helps in creating scaffolding which helps students to meet their goals.

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Community

Community learning is another major source learners learn in a large scare as it is the primary source of socio-cultural perspectives. By bringing community members characters and contexts into the ESL classroom, learners understand that there is a community which larger than family. Besides, learners learn cognitive development through their interaction with others in the surroundings. When people and their family, culture, lifestyle, interaction with one another, origin etc, are introduced to the students they start thinking in a new way using the knowledge provided by the community as base in analysing and solving the issues projected in L2 classroom. The responsibility of the trainer in this method is members of the community are to be projected as individuals increasing their Zone of Proximal Development.

Interactive task

Students can have better understanding of the surroundings through interactive tasks. For L2 learning speaking and writing skills have been great activities. Sawin and Lapkin stated that speaking and writing are used as cognitive skills that can mediate interaction, improving students' psychological factors, making them social, creating interest and standardizing their knowledge in studies. Pair work, role play, presentations, discussions etc, are measured as interactive tasks. Our education system has become more a memorization process than being creative. Interactive sessions motivate the students creating enthusiasm and eagerness. Trainers have a prominent role in interactive classes. In evaluation of learners' learning trainers might take up the criteria like pronunciation, body language, eye contact etc. enhancing the socio-cultural factors.

Individual work

Vygotsky's theory represents small groups with an opportunity to include individual work. Individual activities can be used for assessments. This reveals what the students actually learned and what is the percentage of student's growth. Term papers, research work and response sheets are proofs of individual work.

Conclusion

In the present circumstances the above mentioned practices can be implemented without any additional arrangements. The basic need is a comfortable classroom environment. Trainer's commitment toward the growth of the learners' and the learners' effort can bring a drastic change in the system. If these conditions are satisfied by the trainers and learners the socio-cultural perspective will be the most sought after method for L2 learners. Involving activities in combination with family members and surrounding society adds extraneous benefits to the students introducing them new perspectives of cultures and diversities giving them scope to think beyond the texts. It results in higher standards of accomplishments. This transforms learners into confident individuals. I share the socio-cultural thoughts of the students that I identified in my experience that could be implemented by trainers in developing the desired L2 skills in students. The socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky has some vital assumptions in education and cognitive testing. Instruction should be planned within the Zone of Proximal Development which can certify the actual growth of the learner. This theory in the ESL classroom declares that learning is a cooperative success and not an individual's action. This influenced changes in the education system through the increased significance given to the learners. It also improves students' learning process and support of trainer-learner collaboration creates a mutual learning experience.

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