

A REVIEW OF SOME POPULAR OPINIONS ABOUT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TEACHING: THE SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY (SCT) PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. The Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has influenced Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and teaching these days. This theory has rooted in different domains of SLA including interaction, cognitive processes and individual differences. This paper is a review of how Sociocultural Theory (SCT) be incorporated into SLA and teaching. Six out of seventeen statements that Lightbown and Spada (2006) revealed as the most popular opinions in the field of SLA and teaching have been examined to see the consensus of these statements with Sociocultural Theory (SCT). This review concludes that Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides new insights over SLA and teaching in which may be useful for second language (L2) learning activities and teaching atmosphere. However, most studies have also supported the inconclusive statements of issues in SLA and teaching which are also identified from the perspective of the sociocultural Theory (SCT). They are that the 'how' in SLA is much more critical than the 'what' or 'when'.

Keywords: *Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Teaching.*

The remarkable aspects included in the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) have become topical issues in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and teaching. These aspects mainly suggest that L2 teaching and learning may work well if the socio-cognitive pieces as well as individual differences be facilitated in certain circumstances to promote target language acquisition.

Having read and examined the specific features of SCT, the writer was interested to revisit common issues and beliefs of SLA and teaching from the perspective of SCT, in which she believes as the most comprehensible assumption of how an of how L2 acquisition should be facilitated and taught.

This review is basically poked around Lightbown and Spada's popular statements at the beginning of their book 'How Languages Are Learned' (2006). Six statements that the writer chose to discuss have

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been well structured to reconsider beliefs of how an L2 is taught, including a response over individual differences and socio-political issues of what it means to be successful language learners.

Languages are mainly learned through imitation

One key concept that has influenced my understanding of the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of SLA is the 'awareness' or what some linguists call 'noticing hypothesis' (Schmidt, 1999; Gass, 1998 cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Gass and Mackey (2006) studied the process of interaction in which 'noticing' is considered an important aspect in learning a second language (L2). They point out that the process of interaction, including the negotiation of meaning, leads to noticing or awareness of the differences between learners' language production and the needed form of the target language (p.4).

Like Gass and Mackey, Nassaji (2010) highlights the importance of noticing in terms of developing the Focus on Form (FonF) technique. According to Nassaji, noticing can be divided into two; noticing the gap and noticing the hole. Noticing the gap is when the learners receive feedback during interaction that makes them aware of the difference between their output and the target language form. Similarly, noticing the hole is the learners' awareness that their language is not appropriate when the interlocutors ask for clarification. This indicates that they are not able to send the messages in an appropriate way (p.909).

In my opinion, the 'noticing hypothesis' is a better concept for understanding how cognitive processes relate to second language acquisition. What I mean by saying this is that interaction and feedback is important and necessary for activating the brain to process the language input and to produce output. This contradicts what Krashen claims about interaction, which he considers as unnecessary in second language acquisition (1998, p. 179). However, I think, Krashen's assertion is limited to the detriment of individual differences and social interaction. In his article, the 'Comprehensible Output?', Krashen argues that output is not necessary unless there is a need to communicate and be understood. Further, he contends that comprehensible input is the only way to acquire the language before producing the language (p. 180). I agree that comprehensible input is important but input will only be made comprehensive through interaction and the provision of feedback.

This claim is supported by the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) studies which highlight the substantial role of social interaction in learning a second language (Gass and Mackey, 2006; Latolf, 2000; Tarone and Swain, 1995). In addition, the noticing hypothesis is beneficial for second language teachers and learners since this process may actuate the interlanguage restructuring.

In the end, it is an apparent that second language (L2) learning is not a passive process in which learners listen and repeat. It is obviously social interaction which mediates cognitive processes of second language

acquisition defined by Vigostky's Zone of Proximal Development (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Poehner, 2010).

The earlier a second language is introduced in school programs, the greater the likelihood of success in learning

As I examine this statement, there are some interesting issues for discussion in order to understand the influences of early or later introduction of a second language. Firstly, what does it mean by the word 'success'? Will it be a similar level of success if early introduction of an L2 is applied in a second language as well as in a foreign language classroom? Is early introduction the only indicator for being successful in learning an L2?

A key statement that I am certain of is that the concept of age, Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), is always related to being successful or unsuccessful language learners or so called 'native-like' competency. Interestingly, Lightbown and Spada conclude that being a successful language learner is difficult to determine by/using specific individual characteristics including age (p. 75). A successful language learner is an ambiguous term. Like Agullo (2006), I agree that having success in a second language should always be related to every individual's objective for learning the language as well as the learning context (p. 367). Linguists who support the Critical Period Hypothesis usually correlate age and native-like competency as indicator of success in learning a second language.

In 1989, Johnson and Newport conducted research on the early introduction of a second language among 46 Korean and Chinese immigrants in the United States. They concluded that age has a significant role (in enabling a person) to develop native-like proficiency in second language performance. A similar study by Abrahamson and Hyltenstam (2009) asserts that there were only a few children who started learning an L2 who could be classified as achieving native-like proficiency while there was no one adult participant whose production could be considered as native-like. Even though these two studies shown that children are more likely to achieve native-like proficiency in pronunciation and grammar, it seems to be unclear for me if the native-like proficiency becomes the indicator for being successful in learning a second language. My contention is mainly derived due to the lack of discussion about what the meaning of being a successful or unsuccessful language learner is.

An early introduction of L2 in an ESL context (where learners have huge access of the target language) may not end up with a similar level of success if it is applied in a foreign language context (where learners get access only in the classroom). An immigrant child learning English in an ESL classroom will have a different success rate than a child in Indonesia who learns English as a foreign language subject. The ESL learner is probably expected to have a native-like accent while the EFL child is hoped to comprehend written messages or acquire basic

interpersonal communicative skills. Given this specific issue, different learning context, I like the conclusion drawn by Agullo (2006) about applying different teaching techniques to facilitate successful learning among children and adults:

‘Overcoming the critical or sensitive period is not a question of deciding *when*, but *how*.’ (p.372)

Agullo proposed a sophisticated model for teaching children and adults by taking into consideration their developmental processing ability rather than their age. Agullo pointed out that children are more likely to learn language implicitly and therefore it is not appropriate to explain grammatical rules for this age group. In contrast, adults’ cognitive thinking ability is much more complex which makes them more analytical learners and therefore, they pick up language rules faster than children do (p. 367). This implies that teacher should be able to adapt different teaching approaches and techniques to enable different age groups success in learning a second language.

In conclusion, there is no point in either agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. The SLA studies have proven that every individual has different cognitive abilities in acquiring a second language. Like Lantolf and Poehner (2010), I agree that Vigotsky’s ZPD hypothesis is useful in helping teachers to create a more appropriate learning context to develop students’ conceptual understanding (p. 14).

When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in a group or pair activities), they copy each other’s mistakes

Considering Vigostky’s ZPD hypothesis, Swain et.al (2002) reviewed common studies between peer-to-peer interaction and SLA. They argued that by questioning, disagreeing, proposing possible solutions as well as collaboratively working in other socio-cognitive activities, learners support one another in acquiring the target language during interaction (p. 173).

Swain and Lapkin (1998 cited in Swain, et.al, 2002) studied interaction between two students in French immersion class doing a writing task. They found that students did not ultimately accept every single correction made by their peers. They sometimes reject the revision because they think it changes the meaning they want to deliver or it is unnecessary (p. 174). This infers that learners do not imitate or accept every feedback without processing it cognitively.

Similarly, Lynch (2001) studied students talking about errors and providing revisions of their peers’ output. Lynch notes that:

‘The precision required for transcribing and revising the transcript raises the demands of the task, in a way that draws the learners’ attention to language form and use in a relatively natural way, and without the direct intervention of the teacher.’ (p. 128)

In regards to the Sociocultural Theory in SLA, this process correlates to both the output and noticing hypothesis (Gass and Mackey, 2006) in which learners are assisted in acquiring language by negotiating their language production and therefore restructuring interlanguage.

Teachers should teach simple language structure before complex one

In his article 'Current Issues in The Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective, Ellis (2006) provides a comprehensive definition of what 'grammar teaching' means:

'Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.' (p. 84)

He further explains that grammar teaching can be devoted to the development of interlanguage in which invokes two components. These components are the type of grammatical models and features. Grammatical feature is related to the term 'simple and complex structure', which was coined by Krashen (1982 cited in Ellis, 2006), as 'developmental sequences'. Krashen's developmental sequence has affected explicit grammar teaching in which learners are taught to understand metalinguistically particular features of a language structure. However, a number of studies have proven that Krashen's developmental sequence is not a warranty to define simple and complex structure (Green & Hecht, 1992; Macropy & Stone, 2000 cited in Ellis, 2006).

For years, the trend of grammar teaching has shifted from explicit grammar teaching to implicit, which focuses on meaning rather than form. The implicit teaching of grammar often relates to the feedback provided during interaction. Nonetheless, the study result by Ellis et, al (2006) showed that explicit teaching has more significant impact in grammatical acquisition rather than the implicit feedback promotes (p. 364).

It seems obvious to me, now, that the problem with grammar teaching then is not about 'what or when' to teach but 'how' to teach. The 'how' to teach is related to both explicit and implicit teaching in which learning is scaffolded within students' ZPD enables the learners to notice and produce correct language forms. I believe that the important thing to be considered is about how to respond to students' learning difficulties which is highlighted by Ellis (2006). He emphasizes that grammar should be paid more attention when students encounter problems either in understanding specific grammatical features in order to facilitate the internalization of features in order to use the forms correctly (p. 88).

It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language

I view this issue differently from other statements in term of the sociolinguistic matter and individual learner's goal to study a second language. Two aspects influence my contention are; cognitive development and the socio-political perspective. Firstly, in regards to phonology research into SLA, Abrahamson and Hyltenstam (2009) noticed that only few young learners can achieve native-like pronunciation and it is impossible for adults to acquire this competency. Secondly, some learners have strong motivation to acquire native-like pronunciation while others think that it is irrelevant goal for learning the language indicating that their main goal is simply to communicate. Some believe that maintaining first language accent is important as a sign for preserving self identity (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

Regarding these different perspectives and goals as well as study result into SLA phonology, I think that we should not overly emphasize pronunciation and the goal to achieve native-like accents. To my understanding, intelligibility is much more important than being able to produce every single sound correctly. Like Jenkins (2002), I agree that English for international communication should not be limited to standard pronunciation, also noting that there are various accents of English recently, which makes it difficult to define which accent the L2 learners should learn. Furthermore, I find that it is impossible for EFL learners, like in Indonesia, to achieve native-like pronunciation if the exposure of the target language is limited.

The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading

Vocabulary teaching is always linked to the reading skills teaching as it is commonly found in English course books. However, I notice that Laufer (2003) raises an interesting comment concerning this statement:

'We can wonder whether reading is indeed the main source of L2 vocabulary, particularly in an instructed language learning context. If reading is indeed the main source of instructed second language vocabulary acquisition, then instead of word-focused, learners should be required to read as much as possible in and outside the classroom' (p. 568).

From the comment made by Laufer, I conclude that reading should not be the focus as the best or skill to mediate vocabulary acquisition. The fact is that reading cannot be overly emphasized as the main source to acquire vocabulary (Krashen, 1985; 1989 cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006) has not significant impact over reading as a macro skill to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Most studies in SLA vocabulary are conducted

through the mediation of reading skills (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer, 2006; Laufer, 2003).

It should be a great concern for teachers and material developers to be aware of learning needs, individual differences and cognitive development in relation to SLA and teaching. Developing appropriate tasks for scaffolding students within their ZPD is necessary to help them acquire the target language rather than arguing what is the best skill to facilitate vocabulary acquisition.

Conclusion

To sum up, the readings, ideas and discussion that the writer has encountered within this study has revealed new approaches in L2 teaching and learning, especially to broaden EFL teachers in Indonesia.

It is apparent that by understanding the socio-cognitive processes in SLA, English teachers may gain applicable ideas to develop appropriate lessons to assist EFL learners in acquiring English. A better rationale and lesson planning may be utilized by the applying the concept of SCT. In particular, the noticing and interaction hypothesis in particular, the influence of the noticing and interaction hypotheses have been well explained in most studies of individual differences.

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