Using Sociocultural Theory to Examine the Context(s) of Language Learning and Teaching

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When introducing a sociocultural approach to research on second language learning and teaching, it helps to make theoretical and methodological positions clear. Following this introduction, which first includes a brief discussion regarding the theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural theory, the Forum will consist of five commentaries outlining current research that is in process, each one employing a sociocultural perspective to explore issues in second language learning and/or teaching.

Central to a sociocultural approach to research and methodology is the social formation of mind (Wertsch, 1985; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Lantolf and Johnson (2007) unambiguously describe what this means: "We want to be clear on this point. The argument is not that social activity influences cognition, but that social activity is the process through which human cognition is formed" (p. 878).

There are both cautions and implications attending this assertion. Beginning with the cautions, there are at least three that are important to mention. The first is that sociocultural theory does not deny the existence of cognitive processes—for example, memory constraints on the brain, voluntary memory, attention, planning, and so forth, are not rejected. Rather, sociocultural theory holds that the development of these higher-order processes are rooted in experience, in the socially situated context that is present in all human activities. In the words of Vygotsky (1978), these cognitive processes

> [appear] twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first *between* people (*interpsychological*) and then inside…(*intrapsychological*)….*The transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events* [italics in original]. (p. 57)

A second caution is closely linked to that just described. Sociocultural theory does not deny that individuals develop and mediate their own higher-order, cognitive processes. However, this perspective is clear on its position that the ability to develop and mediate individual cognition, as it begins socially, is not best studied, either theoretically or methodologically, as if it occurred solely or even mostly in the minds of individuals separated from their context. Rather, it is only in full consideration of the context in which it occurs that the processes of cognitive formation open up to examination.

A final caution has to do with the range of topics that are examined within a sociocultural framework. As with any body of research, those who are engaged in using sociocultural approaches in the study of learning and teaching are engaged in a variety of issues, some of which may seem peripheral at times and others of which may seem to be in contradiction (e.g., they use different terms to say the same thing). What is central, however, is the underlying belief in and commitment to a theory and methodology whose starting point is the social formation of mind.

Turning now to a brief discussion of the implications that accompany a sociocultural perspective, first, and perhaps the most important, is that if a strong position about the social

formation of mind is claimed, it is incumbent upon those who do so to point to a path of how this happens. Indeed, this is the major focus of study that occupies those who adopt such a viewpoint, and each of the examples of work presented here in the Forum proposes to examine different aspects.

Secondly, the discussion of situated context in and of itself is difficult to capture, due to the complexity involved. That is, a unit of analysis that takes seriously the socially situated aspects of human activity (Davydov, 1999; Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) can make it difficult methodologically to fit all the parts together for any given data set, as welcome and enlightening as carrying forth such level of complexity may be. This can be true both in terms of selecting what aspect/s to include and how to interpret the interaction of this selection with the rest of the context (i.e., how to reintegrate the examined portions of the context with its whole). Honing in on any one aspect of the context produces reverberations that echo throughout the whole, and this must be identified and tracked.

Finally, a sociocultural approach carries methodological implications, and often uses methodologies identified as micro-genetic. Based on the notion that learning progresses slowly over time, via many small steps (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57), the arc of learning is one whose genesis is demonstrated in minute, or micro, moment-to-moment occurrences. Insofar as the goal of a sociocultural approach is to illuminate underlying social processes of learning as they lead to cognitive development, attention to these micro moments is imperative. Strictly quantitative methods that are based on what happens to collections of individuals out of their social context, or that "dip in" at various points in the arc of learning, are not well-suited to the questions posed within a sociocultural approach. In discussing the genetic approach, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) are clear:

> The methodology is not intended merely as an alternative to other research methodologies, but is in fact a necessary consequence of Vygotsky's new way of theorizing humans and human psychological functions as mediated by social practices and cultural artifacts. In essence, the methodology, generally referred to as the "genetic method," emerges from the stance that Vygotsky adopted for overcoming the mind-body dualism that had in his view affected psychology and other social sciences for years. (p. 25)

Within the presentation of the studies-in-process that follow in this Forum, there is some common terms that will be presented here as a brief reference guide for understanding these texts.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD in terms of actual and potential development. The hallmark of actual development is independence (i.e., what the learner is able to do independently). Potential development is what is beyond the independent understanding or problem solving abilities of the learner. Within one's potential development, the ZPD refers to a special zone characterized by what the learner can do with assistance, en route to independence. It is important to note that the ZPD is not statically defined by an outside task or piece of knowledge (e.g., a grammatical form), but is part of a larger process that defines learning in terms of the ever-shifting needs of a learner.

Internalization: Internalization is the process by which what is external to the learner, existing on the *interpersonal* plane, moves inward to the intrapersonal plane. In another way of speaking, internalization is the process that assists the learner through the ZPD. There are several processes

identified by Vygotsky (1978) and others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) that advance internalization, including, but not limited to, imitation, scaffolding, and play/role playing. For the purposes of this Forum, we will define scaffolding.

Scaffolding: Also referred to as *assisted performance* (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), scaffolding is the novice-expert interaction through which a more capable other provides assistance to the learner or novice. Tharp and Gallimore further delineate the requirements for successful scaffolding, stating that the expert must (a) know what the learner is trying to learn, and (b) understand what the learner needs in order to learn. The terms novice and expert are not defined by age, nor are they static. In other words, a younger, less experienced person may find himself in the role of expert within a given context, a role that can then shift as the context for learning shifts. This is especially important when considering, for example, instances of scaffolding within group work among peers. The term peers, in this case, does not imply static equality, but is broad enough to include shifting levels of expertise.

Intersubjectivity: In order for there to be successful scaffolding, the novice and expert need to understand each other, as implied in Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) second requirement given above. If I am the expert, I need to understand what the learner knows and needs to know—in short, where the learner is. On the other hand, if I am the novice, I need to understand what the expert is trying to tell me, to move beyond my current level of understanding. This mutual understanding is created during interaction, and is referred to as intersubjectivity.

The following commentaries each use a sociocultural perspective to discuss work in process. Heesook Cheon discusses computer-mediated communication (CMC) within the context of telecollaboration between Korean learners of English and English learners of Korean. Ruhma Choudhury examines portability of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education and communicative language teaching (CLT) curriculum materials as an effect of interaction between global and local contexts, focusing specifically on the case of Bangladesh. Drew Fagan presents research on English as a Second Language (ESL)/EFL teacher education, asking particularly how a sociocultural approach can help account for teacher understandings of the task of teaching. Christine Jacknick presents data that examine unsolicited student participation in a whole-class, adult ESL setting. Finally, June Wai presents a discussion of the nature of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the K-12 setting, focusing particularly on the collaboration (or lack thereof) between subject matter teachers and TESOL teachers to discuss the relationship between language and content.

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