Teachers as Learners: Incorporating Sociocultural Theory into L2 Teacher Education

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Since Frawley and Lantolf (1984) first brought to light the importance of utilizing sociocultural theory in second language research, numerous studies regarding the sociocultural influence in the acquisition of language have been conducted. One common trend throughout the different perspectives within the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory in applied linguistics is the notion of learning. Although the different sociocultural perspectives (Vygotskyan, Bakhtinian, language socialization, situated language learning, and critical theory) have all defined learning slightly differently, one common trend has been the belief that learning occurs through social interaction with others within specific contexts and communities.[1] One question that remains, though, is if these perspectives of sociocultural theory are brought into more mainstream second language classrooms, how can L2 teachers be more prepared to take on this relatively new idea.

As both a practicing English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) educator, I find sociocultural theory a fascinating way to view language acquisition, but also one with which an uphill battle is attached. Most students in TESOL masters programs are introduced to second language acquisition (SLA) from the dominant tradition of cognition (Firth & Wagner, 1997). While trying to grapple with linguistic terminology and, for some, the new concept of teaching, these student-teachers are also indirectly taught how current cognitive SLA theory should be introduced into the classroom in order to maximize students' chances of acquiring English as a second/foreign language. Numerous times I have heard novice teachers struggle with the notion of having to create activities that reflect articles from their SLA and psycholinguistics classes, including, for example, "input flood" and "communicative output tasks." In a previous study where I videotaped student-teachers conducting classes and then had them watch themselves and explain why they conducted their activities in the manner that they did, one of my student-teacher participants exclaimed how she felt too domineering in the class because her teacher talk time was extremely high. She said, "I am not giving them time to answer and that's not good, no output! That's definitely not what I'm supposed to do!" Thus, in her mind she felt that she was not doing what the field wanted her to do. When asked retrospectively why she felt more teacher-dominated talk was necessary in that situation, she expressed how for that particular class she felt that the students actually needed more teacher-dominated talk for that particular grammar lesson (i.e., the learning of regular English past tense). When asked why she felt that was needed, she couldn't provide an exact reason, but rather said, "I could just sense it." However, she immediately reverted to her previous stance that since she didn't allow for adequate student output, she felt like a failure as an ESL teacher.

Connecting this example to Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) notion of *internalization*, the student-teacher believed her domination of the class with high teacher talk time was incongruent with current literature that she had read with regard to language acquisition. However, she felt that there was a need for her to conduct her class in such a manner, so that her students would understand the

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[1] Refer to the other commentaries in this Forum issue for more detailed descriptions of the different sociocultural perspectives.

concept of regular past tense. From a Vygotskyan sociocultural perspective, it is possible that the students, or *novices* in Vygotskyan terms, were at a point in their development where they needed an excessive amount of guidance from the teacher, or *expert*, in the problem-solving of past tense. It may have been that this particular group had not yet internalized this concept and thus were still in a process of needing additional expert guidance in the process of solving the problem at hand, namely how to use the past tense. Rather than worrying about significant amounts of student output, the teacher could have focused more on the interaction that she was having with her students from this perspective, and thus may have better understood the value of her particular teaching style during that class.

Following this perspective of the importance of interaction within a classroom, it is also essential to note that the role of expert in interaction is not solely limited to that of the teacher but can also be applied to another learner who has internalized a facet of the language that others may not have. Wertsch (1990) describes one way to determine whether internalization has occurred by checking if the novice is able to comfortably explain the concept in his own words. For pedagogical purposes, this could be exemplified with Palinscar and Brown's (1984) notion of reciprocal teaching, where one student in a group is considered the expert of the task or activity at hand and takes on the teacher's role in explaining difficulties to others in the group. This concept can be extremely difficult for teachers, especially novices, to implement in the classroom. Many times the second language (L2) teacher believes that s/he must be in charge of the class, including activities that may appear to be student-centered but are in fact controlled by the teacher. As a teacher passes from one group to another, s/he may feel inclined to assist students with difficulties even though there may be a student within the group who could provide assistance to the cohort. Rather than taking control of the situation, the teacher could allow the expert to assist the novices in solving the problem, thus allowing not only the novices to work out the problem, but also to have the expert demonstrate the knowledge that has been internalized.

The concept of reciprocal teaching and the difficulty that teachers have utilizing it in their classrooms raises another issue that teachers, when they enter into their L2 classrooms, are themselves already bringing an understanding of what it means to be a teacher and to interact with one's students. Again, taking from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) notion of internalization, teachers themselves have internalized what a "teacher" is and what a "student" is in relation to how classes are conducted. Prior to starting on this career path, these individual themselves were students and assimilated over time conceptions of the roles of teacher and student in the institution of academia. Thus, it is not surprising that when teachers enter L2 teacher education programs and are asked to perform certain activities that are more communicative, group-oriented, or incorporate reciprocal teaching, it may conflict with their own internalized notions of the roles of teacher and student. This may be seen in the previous example where the student-teacher struggled with what she felt was the necessary way to conduct her class with that specific population of students (more teacher-dominated) and with her own conceived notions of the ways in which current theory directs her to conduct her classes (more student-centered). This conflict may be resolved over time, but during that period the teacher may not be able to fully aid students in their own language acquisition.

The situations described in this commentary are examples of situations that occur daily within L2 classrooms where knowledge of sociocultural theory could not only benefit the teacher in setting up tasks and activities that would allow for the facilitation of language learning, but also would benefit L2 teacher educators when introducing these methods to their student-teachers. I believe it is not enough to look at sociocultural theory as it relates to a student's language learning; it can also be used to see how teachers are taught to instruct their classrooms, as an investigation

into "teacher as learner." As was seen in the student-teacher example, these individuals, like the students themselves, are already bringing internalized knowledge from their previous education contexts and are implementing these strategies in the classroom. It has been argued from a sociocultural perspective that teachers need to take into account their students' background, identities, and the specific contexts in which they are teaching when conducting activities in their classes. I believe the same could be argued for the student-teachers in teacher education. However, for this to truly be applied, more people in the field of applied linguistics would need to be educated in the realm of sociocultural theory.

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