

A Socio-Cultural View of Informal Learning of English as a Second Language (ESL)

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Abstract: The study draws on Vygotsky's perspective on the value of tool-mediated learning with real practices and potential of this perspective for the conditions to be clarified. According to Vygotsky, human development is said to be historically and culturally situated through the social interactions and scaffolding from more capable others. Meaning-making and linguistic performance are co-constructed through the internalization of actions and mental operations that develop from symbolic (language) or physical tools in the learner-user's environment. Consequently, in an informal learning activity using ESL and social networking tools will no longer be a goal-directed process but a shift to self-regulated behaviours. Thus, it is important to explore further the socio-cultural patterns that emerge among social networking tools, multi-dimensional learning contexts and the learner-users themselves using the current theoretical framework of social networking-based informal ESL learning.

Key words: Informal learning, ESL learning, social networking tools, socio-cultural approach, perspective, tool-mediated

INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky's work (1896-1934) has led to the development of social constructivism through his theory of social cognitive development. From this paradigm, learning not only occurs through the individual's cognitive processes but also through social, historical and cultural contexts (through which the knowledge was constructed). In other words, cognition (mental, language and social development) is mediated through social interaction among individual's collaboration and out of learner's unique experiences. This is because "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Social sources of development: Vygotsky also acknowledges that social aspects play an important role in understanding the role of language and communication in intellectual development as pointed out by Liu and Matthews (2005) as follows: language should not be seen as merely the accidental assembly of purely physical sounds and forms because any language system is at the same time the result of the whole developmental history of the language. To study a language is to study a meaning system as a consequence of historical

development. Due to the historical aspect of semantics, the interaction between individuals and society is now placed not within constant parameters of stability but on a continuum of time and historical development.

Compared to traditional learning theories, contemporary studies into social-based learning have been meeting different challenges due to the social evolution as well as the impact of media technology. The theories emphasize the social nature of learning processes at an individual level such as learner's needs, motivations, perceptions, experiences and adopting more pragmatic practices (Duke, 2010; Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006; Liu and Matthews, 2005; Salomon and Perkins, 1996). As noted by Salomon and Perkins (1996), the learning process is the ongoing development of "the learner's active engagement in assembling, extending, restoring, interpreting or in broadest terms constructing knowledge out of the raw materials of experience and provided information". Therefore, in many ways, the use of social networking technologies clearly support social constructivist approaches to education by deeply engaging the learners in the learning context, especially in decision making and knowledge development (Duke, 2010).

In fact, the history of educational technology is not linear it presents significant overlapping areas but it still reflects fairly well the revolutions that took place in education as a scientific discipline over many years. The important field of research has greatly expanded from

imple exercises based on fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice exercises, educational technologies have evolved into a field that now includes virtual worlds and social media (Boruta *et al.*, 2011). These theories have been selected for their relevance to the argument that the author is making for a theoretical orientation for this study. Indeed, the learning task can be personalized to the learner's skills rather than the learner having to fit in with the software designer's generalized understanding of how learning ought to occur. The creation of these rich learning technologies needs to be fully integrated to allow for and extend existing learning environments (Shield, 2000). We can clearly see the relevance that social constructivist ideas have in today's educational practices, as real-world social constructivist learning situations are more motivating to students through practical application of knowledge and as a catalyst of knowledge construction (Dale, 2010; Duke, 2010; Dunleavy *et al.*, 2009; Salomon and Perkins, 1996). In view of that, the aim of social constructivist education is to develop learners who are able to engage in independent thought and knowledge creation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mediation in socio-cultural theory: An important aspect of the socio-cultural theory is the consideration that learning is a social process. In his work on the relation between thought and language, Vygotsky *et al.* (1978) sees the mastery of verbal thought as a prerequisite for learning. Language is a cultural tool and used to facilitate the association between the individual language learner and "the social-material world" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). In contrast, physical tools allow the learners to adapt and change "the way (they) live in the world" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Vygotsky also points out that learners already have previous experience of learning and building new knowledge, thus, learner's intellectual development is reflected by their previous experience and the use of tools and cognitive resources. This also reflects the view of Anderson that focuses on mapping mental tasks and reflection in active cognitive processes to provide a further insight into perceiving the learning possibilities around them. The role of such historical-cultural development in learning has been explained by Vygotsky *et al.* (1978) as follows.

Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour but it is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in natural forms of thought and speech. Once, we acknowledge the historical character of verbal thought, we must consider it subject to all the premises of historical materialism which are valid for any historical

phenomenon in human society. Central to a sociocultural theory is the idea of new learning that young learners experience in the virtual learning environment which will not be internalized until it is considered within the context of what the learner already knows (Duke, 2010; Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006; Salomon and Perkins, 1996). In this vein, informal learning provides a ground for learner-users in the social networking environments to consider what they know, the new knowledge that will be acquired and how it can bridge the gap to what is not known. While ESL learners use different mediating tools in learning beyond the classroom, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is ideal to represent the domain where learners share their knowledge and skills with peers and more capable others (Dale, 2010). Vygotsky (1978) explains the concept of ZPD as the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Cognitive support from a more capable person can expand a learner's personal learning or problem-solving abilities and help to promote newer and more advanced behaviours for meaning-making and reflection on new knowledge (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009). In the current study such sharing and encouragement underpin the educational use of social networking, allowing learners to build on prior knowledge and experiences and extend ZPDs which are primary to the development of new knowledge for independent and informal learning in the future. Consequently, learners gain an awareness of the objective environment through speech and social interaction and consequently shape their personality development in terms of perception, reflection and valuable activity. From this perspective, Vygotsky's concept of mediation contributes to the problem-solving approach in learning.

Vygotsky *et al.* (1978) also states that human behaviour is essentially built upon reflection because the learner is able to make indirect connections between incoming stimulation and their individual responses through various mediating links. Alongside such a perspective, Vygotsky *et al.* (1978) proposes that higher mental functions and human actions are mediated by two types of tools, namely technical and psychological. Technical tools are externally oriented at the object of activity whereas signs (psychological tools) are internally oriented at the subject of activity. Due to some ambiguity in the sociocultural theory literature about the term "sign" of the activity for the purposes of clarity in this thesis, the researcher will refer to "sign" as "cognitive resources". Learner-users can control their behaviour from the outside via social networking tools and regulate their minds from the inside through the use of cognitive resources. Thus, the most important aspect of tools

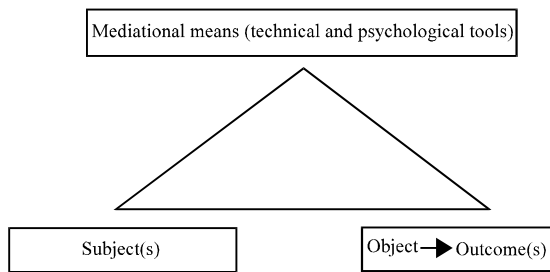


Fig. 1: Graphic representation of Vygotsky's concept of mediation (Engestrom, 1999)

highlighted in this study pertains to qualitative transformation resulting from the introduction of social networking tools as mediation in and the thinking practice of ESL learners leading to informal ESL learning. Vygotsky's concept of mediation is here illustrated as in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 represents Vygotsky's concept of mediation which relates a subject (a person or persons), an object (an objective or goal) and tools that mediate the action. In this sense, the concept of mediation emphasizes a dialectical relationship between humans, society and culture as the catalyst that advances them through the regulation of mind from both the outside world of objects and situations and the inside mental world through the use of tools and cognitive resources. Thus, mediation in this context is the means that "breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from society and culture" (Engestrom, 1999). Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) also write that "the main idea was the need to consider the human use of technology within a wider context of human interaction with the world: an interaction mediated by technology". Therefore, the major potential contribution of social networking-based learning can be argued as contributing to building knowledge and developing learner-user's daily socio-cultural practice.

CONCLUSION

Socio-cultural theory studies of learning involve analyses of artefact-mediated activity, situated in cultural and historical contexts with an emphasis on social mediation processes (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Supporting this, the principle of mediation provides a lens for examining participant's ESL learning out-of-class by suggesting that learner-users are active agents strategically appropriating social cultural tools of social networking. Vygotsky *et al.* (1978)'s sociocultural theory represents the basic relationship between a subject (individual or group) and a cultural artefact (a physical or cognitive tool) in order to transform an object (a goal, objective, purpose or problem).

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