

# **A Socio-cultural Perspective: Analyzing Mediation with Recording**

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## **Abstract**

Sociocultural theory (SCT) was put forward by Vygotsky in the 1980s and initially formed and developed. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that the psychological development of human beings come from material, external and realistic movements. This paper mainly introduces the framework of mediation in the scale. In addition, this study also provides new inspiration for future college English education. When designing classroom tasks, teachers should also take into account the social and cultural background, so that classroom activities and learning cannot be separated from the real context

Keywords: Sociocultural theory; Mediation; Language teaching

## **1. Introduction**

Based on Vygotsky's ideas about sociocultural theory, "All specifically human psychological processes (so-called higher mental processes) are mediated by psychological tools such as language, signs, and symbols" (Karpov & Haywood, 1998, p.27). That is to say, the sociocultural theory concentrated on the abilities of learners' mediation in mental or communicative activity by using their target language; Also, current works continue to research on how second language is mediated in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which enable learners to reach learning goals by using collaborative mediation when they cannot accomplish it alone (Lantolf, 2011). Lantolf (2000) illustrated two main types of social mediation in second language acquisition, which were experts and novices, and peer mediation.

This essay takes a sociocultural perspective to analyze the mediation in language learning by using recording in one classroom activity. There will be firstly a theoretical framework of three concepts, which are mediation, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and activity theory. A brief description of the participants in the recording is followed in the next section. The main body of this essay will be the analysis of the recording. Three parts are selected and explained into details as examples of mediation in the second language development of interlocutors. Pedagogical implications are given in the end.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Mediation, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Activity Theory**

Lantolf (2011) defined mediation as "the creation and use of artificial auxiliary means of acting---physically, socially, and mentally" (p. 25). The function of physical tools could not be observed from its structures, likewise, the structure of language showed no sense of mediating in our social and mental world, therefore, if we want to know the mediation in languages, we must dig up the language use (Lantolf, 2011). "Higher forms of human mental activities are mediated" (Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky (1997) claimed that people had to use tools or labors to build up physical world; similarly, we use symbolic tools to mediate with others in mental world, such as art, music, human languages, and etc.

In the development of mediation, we cannot ignore individual's or group's zone of proximal development (ZPD). There was a transition period from learning language with the help of experts to learning independently, a more knowledgeable person should occur in this period to help students' learning transitions, it was generally called ZPD (Vygotsky, 1987). ZPD helped us know the achievement that individual or group may get with instructions or assistances (Lantolf, 2000). In the findings of study done by Aljaafreh & Lantolf (1994), the researcher found that mediation should be used to a point when learners need instructions or assistances to perform well in their second languages. At this time, a small quantity of expert's help made students realize the errors in their performances. Here, teachers or other knowledgeable people and students are regarded as experts and novices. Besides, there is also another popular pair, the peer-peer interaction. In this type of interaction, peers are both experts and novices at the same time, and they support each other's learning by "questioning, proposing possible solutions, disagreeing, repeating and managing activities and behaviors" (Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002, p.173). Lantolf (2000) positively stated that "dialogic mediation" in peers may be much more efficient compared with the "monologic mediation" presented by teachers (p. 84). Leontiev (1978) claimed that activity could be applied to collaborative interactions to assist performance. The activity included four parts, which were subjects, objects, actions and operations. Taking activity in classroom as an example, the whole process could be like this: 1) Students as subjects got involved in the activities when learning a language. 2) Goals as objects were set up to give students some appropriate directions. 3) Actions were then taken by students to fulfill the specific purposes of the activity. 4) Actions had to accomplish the operational level of the activity. Mediation, to some extent, was an important component in terms of constructing activity (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Therefore, In order to analyze a classroom activity through the lens of sociocultural theory, the author recorded an activity in a postgraduate course and the analysis has been made to identify instances of mediation.

### 3. Description of the Participants

There are four participants in the recording, including a male native speaker (S1) from the UK, and three female non-native speakers (S2, S3, S4) from China. They take one postgraduate course called Introduction to Language Teaching 2 in Lancaster University, work as a group in a discussion activity, and discuss specific topics taught by teachers in the classroom. The whole recording lasts for 15 minutes and 51 seconds.

### 4. Analysis of the Recording

In this discussion, the four students were expected to discuss their opinions on the teaching activities that one experienced teacher called Tony used in the DVD which they have already seen in the class. At first, S2 talked about her ideas and S3 interacted with her. The transcript was given as follows:

S2: Actually, I am interested in the first activity when Tony, is that Tony?

S3: Yeah, Tony.

S2: Tony wanted his students to write....uh, as much as words, which, uh (pause for 3 seconds, silence in the surrounding), which describing feelings on the blackboard.

S3: Yeah, I think it's the words about happiness, to be specific.

S2: Yes, yes, you are right, the words about happiness, and sadness I think. I think it is very helpful. As a kind of brainstorming.

In peer to peer mediation, students "make strategic use of prolepsis to scaffold each other into an appropriate utterance" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 84.) In the research which has been done by Ohta on peer mediation among college level students who learn Japanese, Ohta (2000) found that students were willing to wait for other peers when they struggled to organize their own utterances without interrupting or offering help. In the recording, S2 struggled to express what kinds of words were used by Tony, and the other students did not say anything until she finally succeeded to produce the whole sentence. S3 added some additional information about

the word type after S2 finished talking. Ohta (2000) also found that students may notice what an appropriate time was to allow their peers to think on their own, and when it was necessary to offer assistance, therefore, learners had a sense of others' ZPD. In this part, S3 gave S2 sufficient time to produce her thinking and took the good opportunity to help S2 notice the missing ideas after she finished talking. In this way, S2 produced the sentences more fluently herself and were able to retrieve more words in her mind to organize her utterances.

Moreover, Lantolf (2000) cited Dicamilla and Antón's research on repetition. Repetition, as a mediating strategy, was used in peer interactions. Dicamilla and Antón (1997) found that although repetition did not provide much new information during the interaction, it "enables students to cling to what they have thus far constructed, in order to maintain their focus of attention, to think, to evaluate, and from that point possibly construct new forms" (p. 617). When S2 asked whether the teacher was called Tony, S3 confirmed her opinion, which could be seen as a process of negotiating meaning. However, what was more important in this part of recording was the repetition S2 made in the end. According to the additional information S3 provided, S2 not only noticed that, she also thought it carefully, retrieved her memory and pointed out new ideas as well.

Ohta (2000) also found that interlocutors benefited from each other, especially for less proficient learners; however, another surprisingly finding was the truth that more proficient also profited from the interactions at the same time. All learners have their advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, there is no doubt the two groups are beneficial to each other. Examples are listed below in the recording:

S1: And it was useful when he was using gestures. It was like happy... And it was like sad... (with gestures imitate Tony at the same time).

S4: I don't think it's an activity.

S1: No, oh, sorry.

S4: I think Jenny wants us to talk about activity, new activity. By the way, yeah, yeah, I also think using the gestures is very useful.

..... (3 minutes later)

S1: I think, you know the end, you know the role play wasn't a real role play... They tell stories and...

S2 & S3: No, no, no. The role play was omitted. Because of the time limit....

Although S1 was a native speaker of English, he also made mistakes and misunderstood the requirements of the teacher. So S4 corrected him immediately and told him what the teacher really wanted them to talk about. We could see from this example that even native and proficient speaker make mistakes every now and then, and it is the time that less proficient speakers offer help. Just as what Ohta (2000) found in the research, weaker second language learners not only benefited from working with more advanced ones, the proficient students also need help in the collaborative interactions, that is to say, learners with differential proficiency in the interaction stimulated each other's awareness of their own language. Reminding students of their wrong direction enhances them to move to the right topic quickly and use new words or phrases to go on talking.

Of course, there is no doubt that advanced learners contribute to help weaker ones out in many cases. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) listed some phases of the zone of proximal development, from other-assistance to self-regulation. For example, the first phase was when learners' performances were assisted by more capable others. They could be adults or more excellent peers. During the procedure, capable others provided directions and even did the modeling, learners responded it by imitating. The second stage was when students talked to themselves in order to acquired particular performance abilities. Besides, when learners were stuck, they would ask for help from other competent ones. In the last part of the recording, S1 tried to correct S3's pronunciation and the four students started to discuss one phrase appeared in the DVD. See examples in the following.

S3: And he says to what extent [ekstent] the words express happiness?

S1: To what..? extent [ik'stent]?

S3: Yes, to what extent [ik'stent] (repeat two times) the phrases describe.....

... (5 minutes later)

S3: Do you remember a lady express her feeling as walking in the sky, or walking in the what? I think it's a metaphor to show her happiness...

S2: Ah, walking in the sky? Do you really use walking in the sky?

S1: No, she said walking on the air. Tony recasts walking on air.

S4: So you do use it to express happiness?

S1: Yeah, yeah, sometimes, maybe.

We can see from the first example that S1 helped S2 correcting the pronunciation extent by modeling pronouncing [ɪk'stɛnt], and S2 not only noticed it, but also imitated the pronunciation and talked to herself for two times. Lastly, she pronounced it correctly. The second example showed the process when the four students negotiated the meaning of walking on air. S2 and S3 first thought it was walking in the sky, then S1 corrected them walking on air. This time, capable learner again helped the less proficient ones about vocabulary and phrases. S4, in the end, asked whether native speaker used this phrase because she could not figure it out on herself. S1 confirmed this phrase and S4 probably in the future will put it into use. These examples best describe how mediation contributes to language development for communicators. With the help of mediation in the interaction, interlocutors develop the knowledge of phonology, lexicology, and pragmatics they may use and put them into practical use. This is how their second language is promoted step by step.

## 5. Pedagogical Implications

From the examples in the recording above, we could see that there are many advantages for proceeding peer to peer interaction. Firstly, peers know the appropriate time to give advice, and in this case, learners are given much more opportunities to think independently and make up shortcomings. Secondly, repetition, as a mediating strategy, is effective in peer interactions. Finally, both proficient learners and weaker ones benefit from each other during interactions.

Moll (1992) also suggested that successful organizations were helpful when teachers wanted to assist performance in the zone of proximal development. He also listed many different means of assistances, such as "modeling, contingencies, feedback, instructions, questions, cognitive structuring" (p.187). Teachers could design a variety of activities to assist interactions, and besides, teacher mediation could also be particularly efficient and effective.

## 6. Conclusion

In order to explore how mediation contributes to the second language development, records of an activity in one postgraduate course in Lancaster University is used to illustrate the instances of mediation and the analysis is given in this essay. Definitions of three concepts of mediation, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and activity theory are given in advance to give readers a general idea of the role of mediation in language development. Then the record is divided into three parts, which are used as examples to show how mediation works in the language development of the interlocutors. This essay concentrates on the peer to peer interaction. The first example shows that, learners have a sense of others' ZPD and understand to wait for others thinking on their own before they give advice, moreover, repetition, as a mediating strategy, enhances students to evaluate their performances. The second example points out that, learners of differential proficiency benefit from each other, even weaker learners are helpful during the interactions. The last example concentrates on how proficient learners help other learners to promote their second language learning in terms of phonology, lexicology and pragmatics. Last but not least, there are some pedagogical implications in this research. Teachers could add more well-organized activities which include peer interactions to the language teaching classroom.

Considering limitations of the present study, it is important to inspire new ideas for future research. There is still something to be modified in the future. On the one hand, more research methods can be applied to further

study, for instance, experiments, questionnaires, interviews and diary studies to ensure more data. On the other hand, many researchers focus on exploring how mediation affects language acquisition, few studies relate the findings with language teaching. Since schools in China and many other Asian countries do not take peer interaction seriously in the classroom, future studies should be taken in these areas to see whether mediation works in the language teaching in these schools.

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