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”نوجه نذرنا المتجدد إلى الشباب باأبى يعى
وزره الكبير فى بنا الوطن فىسر عن ساعر
الجر باؤلا فصارى طاقته فى اللإسهام
للإجبابى فى حركة التنمية الشاملة“

“We call upon our youth to be aware of their responsibility for building our country. They must roll up their sleeves with the utmost energy to contribute positively towards our comprehensive development.”

18/11/1993

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Dr. Azzah Al-Maskari

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From the Dean

Welcome to the third volume of Oman Journal of ELT!

While it is true that information comes in many forms, I always believe that journals like this not only provide the information that one needs, but also provoke deeper thinking that empowers you as a reader. This journal presents a wealth of verified knowledge from the efforts of hardworking academic writers, researchers and contributors. Reading through these pages will let you view topics from many educated perspectives, hence helping you formulate your own conclusion. What better way to empower yourself! Read on.

Dr. Azzah Al-Maskari



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Editor

Finally, we present to you the third volume of OJELT. One feature that distinguishes this issue from other issues is its wide-ranging topics and contributions from senior Omani research students from Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat. Such contributions not only enhance the quality of budding Omani researchers but also increase the possibility of bringing out various issues in ELT, education, and literature. OJELT's efforts to encourage research among Omani students are in alignment with the national mission of promoting research among the students in universities and colleges in Oman.

This volume throws light on various issues related to ELT and the relevance of using sociocultural theory, Arabic (L2), and multilingualism in EFL/ESL contexts in Oman. In addition, it also examines the varieties and complexities of English as a global language and the Perceptions of Korean students in Manila on non-native speaking teachers. The paper "Impact of blogging among SQU students" examines the effect of blogging on students' knowledge, critical reflection and writing skills. Other four papers on literature analyze poems through painting and essay, representation of slavery, earlier models of literary representation of space, and the status of children's literature in Oman respectively. We would like to thank all the contributors and ICT administration for their exceptional support in making this volume possible. Also, we take this opportunity to request you all to contribute for the next issue of OJELT.

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The Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This brief introduction to the Sociocultural Theory in language learning presents the main tenets of the theory as well as their relevance to the task of second language learning. Unlike other theories of language learning, this theory gives considerable weight to the society and culture of the language learner, and thus views the language learning task as a result of the interaction between the social, cultural, and individual aspects of the language learner. It also provides findings of a number of studies conducted to investigate the applicability of the theory and its principles to language learning.

Keywords: Sociocultural theory, Second language acquisition

The sociocultural theory in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is largely based on the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who emphasized the role of the society and culture in shaping the (continuous structuring and) development of the mind. Vygotsky gave much more importance to the interaction of human beings with themselves and with each other as well as with the social and cultural aspects of their lives, and suggested that these interactions play a major role in the way people learn in general. While many psychologists view the human mind as a computational device, Vygotsky proposed that the mind is “mediated”. To illustrate, he points out that as we do not approach the physical world directly but through tools and labor activity, we “use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships” (Lantolf 2000:1). He argues that these tools, whether physical, psychological or symbolic, are human artifacts that are created by one generation and modified as they are passed on to the future generations.

Vygotsky’s theory in psycholinguistics is based on the assumption that language is one of the symbolic tools that the human civilization has come

up with. Within this framework, the properties of the brain are organized into a culturally-shaped functional system, or mind, that is responsible for higher mental capacities like attention, memory, orientation, planning, thinking, problem-solving, evaluation as well as learning. Vygotsky points out that as the brain develops and modifies its operation in order to handle these capacities, language is continuously molded by its users to serve their psychological, personal, and communicative needs. As “a theory that focuses on humans as eminently thinking beings, actively involved in the creation of their world” (Lantolf and Ahmed 1989:94), the Vygotskian framework aims at understanding the nature of the human cognitive processes. He also stresses “the importance of social institutions and historical circumstances” (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994:183). This is because the social institutions have an impact on the mental (intellectual) and personal development, and the historical circumstances influence the way and form in which the different human artifacts are transmitted through generations. In brief, Vygotsky claims that there is a link between “semiotically mediated human social interaction and individual cognitive activity” (Lantolf and Ahmed 1989:94).

James Lantolf, among others, has been working within this framework to form the central tenets and core elements of a theory in SLA. Lantolf states that, unlike the Piagetian model of human development where new forms of functioning replace earlier forms, the Vygotskian approach assumes that different genetic forms coexist in thinking and that each form, whether earlier or later, is assigned different operations according to the demands of the situation and the choice of the individual. Moreover, unlike the Acculturation model (Schumann 1978), which predicts linguistic development through interlanguage change, Vygotsky’s theory suggests that “each mode takes on a specific function relative to the *individual* speaker who chooses to access a specific mode” (Lantolf and Ahmed 1989:101) in order to carry out a specific task in a certain situation. Therefore, as Vygotsky considers humans to be active participants in the social setting, he believes that humans create a representation of a situation; that is, they structure the situation and the verbal behavior exercised in it. Moreover, when two people communicate with each other there is said to be a relationship of inter-subjectivity that forms a shared social world (the coming together of each one’s world) that initiates and directs the dialogue. Inter-subjectivity refers to the background shared between the conversation participants which provides an agreed-upon foundation for

communication. Another issue of importance here is the degree of control over the dialogue, which determines which world will dominate the conversation. Vygotsky states that when the control relationship is symmetrical, allowing for unlimited interchangeability of dialogue roles, both participants are said to be self-regulated. However, when the control relationship is asymmetrical, promoting the world view of one of the participants at the expense of the other's, the latter participant is said to be other-regulated.

Moreover, when a second language learner loses self-regulation in the face of a difficult language task, he is said to be object-regulated. Frawley and Lantolf (1985, cited in Lantolf 2000:6) presented intermediate and advanced ESL learners with a difficult narrative task. The performance of the intermediate learners broke down, and they lost control over the mediational means provided by their second language, and became object-regulated. However, the performance of the advanced learners showed control over the mediational means provided by the second language, which led to control over the learning task, and so they are said to be self-regulated. Lantolf (2000:6) argues that "to be an advanced speaker/user of a language means to be able to control one's psychological and social activity through the language".

In addition, Vygotsky claims that it is inappropriate "to separate the syntactic organization of an utterance from its psychological organization" (Lantolf and Ahmed 1989:101). This is because the psychological conditions under which an utterance is produced should be taken into account in assessing the grammaticality and appropriateness of the utterance. Moreover, the degree of control the speaker has on the course of the dialogue should be considered when deciding on their regulation roles in the conversation. Lantolf and Ahmed (1989) argue that their subject's (in a study) production of well-formed sentences indicates that he ceded control of the dialogue to his partner because the negotiation of inter-subjectivity and the shared social world are lost, and he became other-regulated. In contrast, the subject's shift to a more pragmatic mode indicates that he started sharing the control over the dialogue with his conversation partner, and became self-regulated. This is to say that as inter-subjectivity is negotiated and the shared social world is exploited, the participants feel psychologically more comfortable with the topic and partner, and so less need will there be for fully syntactic speech. The

findings of this study support the Vygotskian notion of the coexistence of different forms of functioning, each taking over in a specific situation depending on what the language learner, as an active actor, thinks is suitable. Thus, the relationship between the syntactic and pragmatic modes is not a developmental one, rather it is up to the learner to choose which to use when. In addition, the sociocultural theory rejects the position that regards thinking and speaking as one and the same thing; it also rejects the position that thinking and speaking are completely independent phenomena. Instead, it argues that “while separate, thinking and speaking are tightly interrelated” (Lantolf 2000:7) in that publicly derived speech expresses privately initiated thought and that linguistic activities have no real value unless they manifest some thought.

With regard to the phenomenon of SLA, Vygotsky’s theory provides a set of constructs that enable us to take a close up at the task of L2 learning as well as a set of assumptions about learning in general and language learning in specific. One of the main constructs is the theory of activity, which addresses the implications of Vygotsky’s “claim that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity” (Lantolf 2000:8). This is to say that the human activity results from a psychological and social functional system, the mind, which, in turn, results from the culturally developed biologically given brain. Other researchers posited that for a certain task to be an activity, it has to have motives and goals. As such, activities are carried out in certain spatial and temporal conditions and through appropriate mediational means, and so their nature is expected to change as these elements change. This is to say that an activity does not always end in the same way it was intended or expected. Thus the learners are forced to engage in reformation, that is, to change their relationships with the activity via changing the mediational means.

Verity (2000) shows the stages she went through as she was trying to restore her identity as an expert language teacher. She documents her sense of loss and recovery of self-regulation as she entered the Japanese educational culture. She was trying to scaffold herself, rather than seek (external) other-regulation. Moreover, this relationship changes as the mediational means change as a result of a change in the respective relationships between the learners and the elements of the activity and the other learners in the situation. To illustrate, Thorne (1999, cited in Lantolf

2000:11) concluded that foreign language communicative competence improved as the learners' interaction was mediated through the internet. As the students reported that they felt less culpable, they, communicating through the internet, started exhibiting negative speech behavior, that is unacceptable language. He argues that despite their illegal language, "this different form of mediation enhanced creative language use in which fun and wit were valued and which fostered dynamic engagement with others instead of comprehensible input and information exchange" (Lantolf 2000:12). This is because learners are viewed here as active actors who can shape and reshape their behavior and the situation as different mediational means are employed.

Another two related constructs in Vygotsky's theory are internalization and inner speech. Internalization roughly refers to the transfer of external mediation to an internal plane. Inner speech is the self-talk that we engage in as we are planning for an activity or carrying it out. Inner speech affects the way in which we carry out certain activities because it is changed by the external and social experiences that we engage in. Therefore, internalization witnesses the "convergence of thinking with culturally created mediational artifacts" (Lantolf 2000:13). Donato (2000) presents a study that illustrates the value of inner speech during grammar instruction in an ESL class. The students showed that they often need the opportunity to mediate their learning privately, that is, appealing for assistance through private speech. Another notion that the sociocultural theory is based on is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which refers to the "site where social forms of mediation develop" (Lantolf 2000:16) though it does not refer to a physical place situated in time and space. For Vygotsky, ZPD refers to the difference between what we achieve alone and what we achieve when we work with others or with cultural artifacts. Some researchers point out that the ZPD involves interaction between a novice and an expert where some ability, like language, can be transmitted from the expert to the novice. This situation is similar to apprenticeship where social and professional experience is transmitted from a teacher (master) to a student. The proponents of this theory claim that the transmission of abilities resides in imitation. However, their conception of imitation differs from that of the behaviorists'. To illustrate, this imitation should not be an exact copy of the expert's (verbal) behavior; that is, it is supposed to be an imitation of portions of the adult's (expert) utterance. For example, Swain (2000) examines mediation from the perspective of collaborative dialogue

in foreign language classes. She states that the students did not negotiate meaning in their dialogues, rather they negotiated language learning. Therefore, she suggests that collaborative dialogues are a key form of mediated learning. This is because collaborative learning took place between students of different proficiency levels without the intervention of the teacher.

The sociocultural theory seems to capture a lot of important observations in SLA, and thus has great potentials for application in the L2 classroom. This theory views the language learner as being able to restructure the interactive situation and the verbal behavior that it requires. In addition, it insists on the interaction with learners with a higher level of proficiency in the L2 (or L2 native speakers) so as to facilitate language learning, where the teacher can be the L2 speaker of a higher proficiency, or he can assign activities of collaborative learning where the learners can learn from their peers through negotiating form and meaning. Here, the notion of ZPD allows the learner with a lower proficiency level to make use of his potential linguistic abilities with the help of a more linguistically sophisticated user of the L2 (Ellis 1986). Furthermore, if we adopt the notion that the learner has at his disposal more than one functioning form, then we should provide the learner with the elements needed to operate the desired functioning mode. If we emphasize the communicative and interactive aspects of speech (language), it should be considered as a form of behavior manifested in speech acts. This means that the forms of the language will only be learnt if they are meaningful to the learners; that is, they serve a certain function in life activities. And so, learners should be enabled, through the teaching-learning process, to do form-function mapping/association, which refers to the ability of identifying “a particular function which can be performed by means of a particular form” (Ellis 1997:139). Moreover, since language (spoken or sign) is the overt expression of thought (Pinker’s 1994 *mentalese*, or language of the mind), linguistic forms are most likely to be acquired if the pragmatic and social aspects of language are stressed. In addition, the appropriateness of the speech (or structures) to the communicative situation should be as important as its grammaticality. This is not to say that grammaticality is not important, but rather it should be assessed after considering the psychological and social frame within which the utterance is produced.

As a matter of fact, the shared social world seems important to minimize social distance, and it also affects the degree of control one can have over the dialogue, which, in turn, determines the nature of the produced speech. In addition, since motivation seems to affect our determination for self-regulation, which results from the control over the psychological and social activities in language learning, then it should be enhanced by all the elements of the teaching-learning process. Internalization, though in a different sense, is key to language learning and processing. Likewise, inner speech or self-talk is important in changing and shaping our relationships with ourselves and with things and people in the communicative situation, which determine the path the learning activity is going to take.

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