Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning

Introduction to the Special Issue

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The papers included in this issue report the findings of studies on various aspects of second language learning informed by the sociocultural theory of mind developed by the Russian psychologist and psycholinguist Lev S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. Researchers working on educational problems in general, and those of us working on questions relating to second language learning, in particular, have found Vygotsky’s ideas challenging, at times perplexing, but always stimulating and informative. Although the details of sociocultural theory are fleshed out in the six papers that follow, it is important to underscore from the outset that Vygotsky’s fundamental theoretical insight is that higher forms of human mental activity are always, and everywhere, mediated by symbolic means.

Vygotsky developed his proposals on symbolic mediation based on analogy with the processes through which humans mediate their interaction with the world of objects through the use of physical tools. Mediation, whether physical or symbolic, is understood to be the introduction of an auxiliary device into an activity that then links humans to the world of objects or to the world of mental behavior. Just as physical tools (e.g., hammers, bulldozers, computers, etc.) allow humans to organize and alter their physical world, Vygotsky reasoned that symbolic tools empower humans to organize and control such mental processes as voluntary attention, logical problem-solving, planning and evaluation, voluntary memory, and intentional learning. Included among symbolic tools are mnemonic devices, algebraic symbols, diagrams and graphs, and, most importantly, language. Although physical and symbolic tools are collaboratively constructed by the members of a culture over time, a crucial difference between these two forms of mediation resides in their relative directionality. The former are outwardly directed toward objects, while the latter are inwardly directed toward subjects. Thus, symbolic tools are the means through which humans are able to organize and maintain control over the self and its mental, and even physical, activity.

According to Vygotsky, mental development arises as a consequence of the interaction of two distinct processes, one with biological roots and the other with sociocultural origins. These two developmental lines merge during the ontogenesis of children. Research by Vygotsky and others was able to demonstrate that once children begin to integrate symbols as auxiliary means of mediation into their physical and mental activity, this activity takes on a markedly different, and culturally influenced, character. To illustrate the difference between mediated and nonmediated mental functioning, we can consider the simple example of someone trying to remember which items to purchase in a grocery store. The person can attempt to remember the items through repeated rehearsal until the items are memorized or can remember the items by writing them down on a piece of paper. Although both cases entail the use of language as a mediational tool, in the first instance, the person establishes a more direct link between the items and their memory trace; while in the
second case, the person creates an even more powerful auxiliary link by generating a shopping list, which greatly eases the mental strain of trying to imprint the items into one’s memory.

Symbolically mediated mental functions are appropriated by children as they carry out specific culturally defined tasks under the guidance (i.e., mediation) of other individuals (e.g., parents, older siblings, teachers, etc.), who initially assume most of the responsibility for carrying out the tasks. Over time, children assume increased responsibility for organizing and deploying their own mental activity in tasks and, under normal circumstances, ultimately attain the ability to function independently of the other’s guidance. Thus, at the outset of ontogenesis, conscious mental activity is distributed and jointly constructed in the dialogic interactions that arise between children and representatives of the culture. As children participate in these collaborative interactions, they appropriate for themselves the patterns of planning, attending, thinking, remembering, etc. that the culture through its representatives values. Hence, what is at one point socially mediated mental processing evolves into self-mediated processing.

Given that collaborative mental activity is carried out primarily through linguistic means (initially speaking but later writing, in literate cultures, at least), Vygotsky argued that self-controlled cognitive functioning would also be linguistically mediated and would carry traces of its social beginnings. This self-controlled linguistic mediation is referred to as inner, or private, speech. Because of the developmental relationship between social and inner speech, even when we appear to be acting alone in “splendid isolation,” as for example, when we take tests in the educational setting, we are not alone. We externalize on paper, assuming it is a paper and pencil test, the results of our having participated in distributed activity mediated by dialogue with other individuals in our immediate, and even distant, past.

Mediation is the common thematic thread which runs through the six papers included in this issue. Although the papers are bound together by this fundamental sociocultural principle, each considers its implications for second language learning and performance from a different, though related, perspective. Hence, the reader of this special issue will encounter the important corollary statements of sociocultural theory which emanate from its core principle of linguistically mediated cognition. The first paper, by McCaffery, presents a synthesis of the empirical research that has been brought out to date on the function of private speech in second language learning and performance. McCaffery considers the divergent claims that have been made regarding the regulatory function of verbal aspect in the private speech of L2 learners. He discusses how speaker proficiency and cultural background may influence the frequency of private speech production and addresses what he sees as productive areas of future research, including the relationship between L2 private speech and nonverbal gestures and comparative research on the private speech of tutored and nontutored L2 learners.

The second paper, by Appel and Lantolf, presents the results of a comparative study of the self-mediation of L1 and advanced L2 speakers of English given the task of recalling a narrative and an expository text. The authors propose that any differences between native and non-native speakers of a language are not categorical but are very much task dependent. They further argue that recall tasks as employed in reading research and pedagogical practices do not necessarily elicit the kind of performance from L2 speakers that we have assumed. They interpret the evidence presented to show that speakers often speak, not to remember the contents of what they have read but to construct meaning from what they have read. Recall tasks, then, may not consistently assess reading comprehension but may, instead, enhance comprehension itself, the very process they are designed to assess.

In the following paper based on analysis of the portfolios of classroom learners of French, Donato and McCormick argue that learning strategies can neither be directly taught nor are they a function of cognitive style or learner personality, but arise as a by-product of the mediational processes at work in the foreign language classroom culture. Significantly, they contend that learning strategies are closely linked to the formation of clear and specific goals for learning. To understand the significance of this finding, the authors situate their analysis within the important sociocultural notion of Activity Theory.

The next two papers explore the effects of mediation on L2 learning as it is jointly constructed in the zone of proximal development (ZPD)—an interpersonal configuration which brings into contact the individual’s past learning and future development. Aljaafreh and Lan-
tolf present evidence from adult ESL learners that shows how corrective feedback, as negotiated between expert and novice in the ZPD, leads to L2 learning. The authors maintain that for corrective feedback to be effective it must be sensitive to the individual learner’s ZPD. Furthermore, they propose that L2 development is not manifested solely in the learner’s ability to produce the correct L2 patterns, but also in the frequency and quality of help co-constructed by the expert and the novice.

From a slightly different perspective, de Guererro and Villamil, in an extensive study of adult ESL writers, examine the effects of peer mediation in the ZPD on the revision process. Although their findings support the general assumption that collaborative revision between peers is a positive move that should be fostered in L2 writing, they caution that asymmetrical interactions, in which one of the members of a given dyad is able to control the performance of the other member, may be more conducive to learning than symmetrical interactions, in which both members of a dyad compete for control.

Platt and Brooks, in the final paper, undertake a reinterpretation of such pivotal terms as acquisition rich environments and comprehensible input. Based on their analysis of interactions among learners in a vocational ESL class as well as in a Swahili as a foreign language class, they suggest that much of what is relevant to the language learning process is often overlooked in traditional acquisition studies informed by the assumptions of information processing theory, because such studies fail to take full account of what learners are actually attempting to do as they co-construct their own learning environments.

The contributors to this special issue share the hope that the papers included here will serve as a stimulus for continued research on the implications of sociocultural theory for second language learning. We are aware that the kind of research presented in this issue does not reflect the prevailing view within our field. Nevertheless, as it is becoming increasingly clear in the education and developmental literatures, we are convinced that this line of research has significant potential for exploring aspects of the second language learning process that would otherwise remain hidden. It is in this spirit that the participating authors and I would like to express our sincere gratitude to the editor of The Modern Language Journal, Sally Sieloff Magnan, as well as to the journal’s editorial board and to the anonymous reviewers for all of their efforts and support in encouraging the continuation of our enterprise.

Forthcoming in The Modern Language Journal

Lee Wilberschied and Jean-Louis P. Dassier. “Increasing the Number of Minority FL Educators: Local Action to Meet a National Imperative”
Razika Sanaoui. “Adult Learners’ Approaches to Learning Vocabulary in Second Languages”
Akiko Okamura. “Teachers’ and Nonteachers’ Perception of Elementary Learners’ Spoken Japanese”
Anita Vogely. “Perceived Strategy Use During Performance on Three Authentic Listening Comprehension Tasks”
Julia E.B. Hanley, Carol A. Herron, and Steven P. Cole. “Using Video as an Advance Organizer to a Written Passage in the FLES Classroom”
Peter D. MacIntyre. “How Does Anxiety Affect Second Language Learning? A Reply to Sparks and Ganschow” (response article)