

## **Cognitive Aspects of Sociocultural Theory at Work in ESL Classroom: Creating Space for Learner's Personal Experience**

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### **Abstract**

Recycling past experience into present learning experience with the help of the natural instinct of memory and the tutored faculty of reflection has been suggested in this paper as a teaching-learning strategy in developing mainly conversational skills and partly writing skills in a second language. Experience is no way manipulated at any point to suit the learning outcomes—they happen naturally; therefore, learning outcomes are neither theoretically predicted nor validated. Secondly, learners are encouraged to 'communicate naturally' in their mother tongue first, and then they are encouraged to glide into English, as and when they feel confident, bypassing through any form of interlanguage, beginning with the replacement of L1 vocabulary by L2, as syntax of L2 being waitlisted. Two theoretical constructs—one by Karl Marx on labour, and the other from L.S. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory namely, child-adult interaction, have been borrowed for the framework of this pedagogic proposal.

**Keywords:** Sociocultural theory, labour, child-adult interaction, conversational skills, interlanguage

### **Introduction**

The advantages of the learner's own personal experience getting reflected in both the process and output of learning may remain unchallenged; but while the answers to the question 'why' may share common grounds, answers to questions like 'how' and 'how much

experience' may vary. This paper tries to raise to the surface once again, the age-old questions of 'how much personal experience can be incorporated into second language learning' and 'how the past real-life experience can be recycled into present learning experience'.

The title of this paper may mislead the readers and thereby identify the proposal made here with the principles of experiential learning by David Kolb (1984). The proposal made here has no allegiance to any one such methodology; on the other hand, it draws elements from various sources including child psychology, cognitive psychology, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Moreover, the faculty of memory is given a prominent place in this pedagogic device in the form of recalling past experience but not memorization leading to rote learning.

### **Theoretical Framework Adapted**

First, two concepts have been borrowed from Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) sociocultural theory. The first is the adapted version of Karl Marx's theory of labour in shaping a human being and the other is the role of adult-child interaction in mastering a language. A third component that goes into the making of this paper is the faculty of memory.

### **Labour as Cognitive Engagement**

First, Vygotsky, following Karl Marx, believes that "labour plays a crucial role in the formation of uniquely human forms of thinking" (Lantolf & Thorne, p. 30). Ever since the early days in which conceptualization sprouts in the child, labour too becomes part of the child's existence. Physically, as well as cognitively, the child is engaged in some sort of labour in his effort of knowing more about the world—conceptualization. The person in the child who plays and takes part in the hundreds of chores at home and the other person in the child who studies at school are one and the same. The element of ego at work behind the numerous 'showing off efforts', the desire for self-actualization, the efforts to get identified as an inseparable part of the family and society, the willingness to shoulder responsibilities, the eagerness to become an adult in all respects—these are uniformly distributed throughout the activities performed by the child, whether at school or at home.

The basic hypothesis underlying this paper is that labour—both physical and intellectual—if incorporated into learning, the cognitive factors at

work behind the labour are likely to get internalized more easily, and they may remain in the cognitive domain longer than those concepts internalized exclusively through tutoring. In other words, higher order mental functions of the learner may ignite his cognitive functioning, easier and faster. Language as a mediating tool between the mental function on the one hand, and the desired or produced artefact on the other, get assimilated easier. For example, a child who makes a toy-machine by himself using natural or waste materials, first conceives the target toy as a whole, and then in parts; and this part-whole relationship is at work throughout the activity. If alone, the child tells himself, or if in the company of others, tells them his plans in sequences and the expected outcome (process and product, respectively). At the same time, in a classroom when the child listens to the structure and functioning of the same machine, though it is all about a real machine, he does not get as involved in learning, as in the case of making a replica of that machine by himself—however distanced ‘his machine’ is from the real one. Here the child is trying to get the ideal actualized.

### **Learning as Another Manifestation of Labour**

As Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory heavily draws from Marxism, it may be relevant in this context to examine how Marxism views formal education. Education as such is no different from other material production since every production is a two-sided coin—physical and spiritual. Engles wrote in 1863:

Each historically defined form of material production has its corresponding form of spiritual production, and this, in its turn, signifies that human psychology, which is the direct instrument of this intellectual production, assumes its specific form at a certain stage of development. (as quoted by Vygotsky, 1930/1994, p. 177)

As distinct from earlier tradition, Vygotsky argued that cognition and culture are inseparably merged, and any cognitive development in an individual gets triggered from society, and goes back to society, only to change the earlier society from where it originated. Labour, though generally conceived as lower form of human activity, too is capable of operating at the higher order mental functioning. It may be noted in this context that Marx has always tried to establish a connection between labour and human personality.

Going back to the child who is actively engaged in various activities at home, is a person engaged in labour, aiming at a particular material design and production, be it assembling parts of a toy or dismantling a new one, gardening, cleaning the bicycle or any other chore. It may be presumed that every moment spent on fulfilling his plan, the child's personality undergoes change. The child who completed the activity in his own way is a different person than the one who started working. The child has passed through a series of problem solving processes, and those processes have taught the child to anticipate quite a few more obstacles on the way.

Relying on the writings of Marx and Engles, Vygotsky proposed that the difference between humans and higher primates cannot be accounted for solely on the basis of evolutionary development, but emerges from the new and uniquely human form of adaptation to nature that is embedded in socially organized labour (Wertsch, 1985, p. 29). Labour activity, according to Marx, allows humans to transform the world and in so doing to transform the conditions of their own existence. Vygotsky extended this notion to symbolic tools (language being the most powerful) which, ...imbues humans with the capacity to organize and control mental functioning. (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 29-30)

### **Activity and Material Production**

At this point, one may feel rather sceptical about this business of the "violent yoking together of seemingly irrelevant concepts", namely learning and labour, and naturally so. But, what the child is engaged in the whole day at home or at school, is all activities. What is activity in this social-cultural-academic context?

Activity is understood as the fundamental interaction between humans and the world—humans behave actively towards the world (fragments of it), change it (them), and change themselves in this process. Humans as active subjects make fragments of the world objects of their activity and at the same time are affected by the world (fragments of it). (Giest & Lompscher, 2003, p. 268)

Man himself is both the source and result of his material production; all social relations, functions and interactions therefore affect all his products. In this respect, it can be stated that all human relations, functions and interactions, however and in whatever form they may appear, influence his material production. In other words, labour does

not merely distinguish man from the rest of the species, but labour creates man. This tool-mediated activity called labour operates on two levels: instrumental (tool mediation) and social (inter-relation with others). The origin of the tool-mediated labour activity is human environment, that is, it is developed under conditions of cooperation and social interaction among people.

The conventional treatment of activity as something physical or manual and as an observable behaviour, external to mind is not acceptable in Marxian psychology. It rejects the much-established Cartesian mind-body dualism (Kuutti et al., 2006), and sees their joint presence in every human experience, and their combined participation in every human activity, whether physical or intellectual. Marxian thinking has always attempted to overcome the division between physical and intellectual work and to reunite thinking and work which have been hitherto treated as opposites. Vygotsky believed that

...the biological endowment was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for human cognitive processes to emerge, while the social and cultural activities ...provided the mediational means that imbued humans with the power to control their cognitive and physical activity. (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 152)

In fact, not only has such a distinction between physical and intellectual labour been erased out of Marxian thought, but priority or prominence if at all, is given to physical labour as Leontiev (1981) makes it clear:

Human psychology is concerned with the activity of concrete individuals, which take place either in a collective—that is, jointly with other people—or a situation in which the subject directly deals with the surrounding world of objects for example, *the potter's wheel or the writer's desk*. (p. 47, Emphasis added)

Our immediate concern here is more with the 'writer's desk'—children's academic, creative activities included. How are we going to accommodate learning in the category of activity, as a form of labour?

### **Learning Through Interaction**

It is at this point, the second component of the theoretical framework on which this paper has been developed, gets welded with the one that has been discussed so far, namely labour goes with adult-peer interaction. Any interaction with an adult that is initiated by the child

has an activity behind or before it, and that activity may be in its early form of conceiving (e.g., how to open the door with a latch key), just attempted stage (e.g., what next after inserting the key into the keyhole), the stage of getting stuck half way (e.g., tried left and right, but in vain), the stage of getting caught in a deadlock (neither able to open the door nor to pull the key out). The child is at work, engaged in bringing out a change in the environment (fresh air and sunlight into a dark, stuffy room). Simultaneously, the agent of change himself undergoes change—both physical and cognitive. Turning the key left and right is a mode of learning (trial and error), an attempt of problem solving, and an act of self-discovery even if the attempt failed.

How does a learning activity transform a child, just as labour transforms an adult? First, the learner gets elevated from a lower level of thinking, namely empirical thinking to a higher plane of theoretical thinking. The former is related to tracing or establishing superficial connections among objects, people and phenomena, which is more or less driven by instincts, whereas the latter is oriented towards tracing or attributing relations and connections scientifically and logically. As in the child's case exemplified above, "why doesn't the door open even if I turned the key left and right" leads the child to trace the functioning of the lock system, and eventually to the lever principles at work behind the operation—the distribution of the fulcrum, load and force (effort). A child who constantly is engaged in tracing connections logically, and not through the trial and error way, of such elements of a 'whole' is likely to be faster in comprehending such principles in class or through independent reading.

Child's interaction with adults and peers occupies a central position in the psychology pioneered by Vygotsky. 'Collaboration' is a term often used by Vygotsky, though not in the sense of current pedagogic, technical sense of "a joint, coordinated effort to move forward, in which the more expert partner is always providing support at the moments when maturing functions are inadequate", but in a more social sense "to refer to any situation in which a child is being offered some interaction with another person that is related to a problem to be solved" (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 54). Collaboration, in this sense is coexistence, a natural process through which an individual as well as humanity in general grows and develops, though in the highly restricted and widely used sense the term has been interpreted as children working in pairs or small groups

as instructed by the teacher. But, in a larger sense, collaboration with others and interaction with environment shape man's consciousness. In *The German Ideology* (1932), Marx wrote "My relation to my environment is my consciousness."

Referring to the dangers of industrialization and mass and surplus production, Marx has pointed out the resultant degeneration of human beings; but at the same time, he has also directed our attention towards the advantages of collaboration and collective work involved in them.

More than once, Marx demonstrates how labour by itself ... does not necessarily have to cripple human nature, ... but, on the contrary, *it contains within itself endless possibilities for the development of the human personality.* ... The composition of the whole staff of employees from persons of both sexes and all ages ... says Marx, must, under appropriate circumstances, turn into a source of humane development. (Vygotsky, 1930/1994, p. 179. Emphasis in the original)

The word Vygotsky used is not 'human' but 'humane', signifying a spiritual plane. Now, it seems to be pertinent to take up the issue of how to incorporate the sociological construct of labour and the psychological theory of child's adult-peer interaction into a pedagogical framework, so that such a pedagogy may maximize learner potentials for better learning and at the same time, ensures that the child grows into a 'humane' social being of a higher order.

### **Collaboration, Conversation, and Communication**

On a closer observation of the three phenomena, namely collaboration, conversation and communication, one may notice the presence of two or more minds—need not be like-mindedness—and the dynamic operation taking place among them. All of them are always on the move, never remaining static. Moreover, the activation of cognition is the force that keeps them moving. What is more is the role of social metacognition employed in making them dynamic. While 'what I know' and 'how I knew it' compose metacognition, 'what, how much and how I know about the other' and the realization of 'what, how much and how the other knows about me' form the base of social metacognition. The success of all the three phenomena mentioned above heavily depends on the social metacognitive skills of the two persons engaged in them. 'Knowing the other' is a crucial component in all of them.

Second language teachers in general are misguided by the much-established notion of ‘syntax domination’ or the ‘grammar first, message later’ attitude. In such cases, the degree of collaboration between the learner and the teacher may be low; the flow of conversation gets punctuated by the self-filter exercises, and conversation collapses in the absence of message or delayed message.

Conversational and discourse skills are concerned not so much with the mastery of the grammaticized and conventional aspects of language, but more with the mastery of strategies for using those constructions effectively to manage the flow of information across turns in a developing conversational interaction. Skill at conversation involves such things as taking turns appropriately, managing the conversational topic effectively, and repairing a conversational interaction when it breaks down. (Tomasello, 2006, p. 461)

Pragmatic competence in general, or strategic competence as listed above in particular, will not be taken care of by the conventional skill and sub-skill-focused instruction. They will be developed only through collaborative, conversational communication, hence the relevance of adult’s natural interaction with children.

### **Second Language and Cognitive Development**

Observing the early first language speech development in children, Judith Kormos highlights the importance of optimal oral interaction with a purposeful task embedded in interaction.

Acquiring a language by definition is a psychological process that brings about changes in cognition. As language is a tool that is used in interaction with other speakers, language learning is also a social process affecting behaviour and attitudes. One of the most frequent types of verbal interaction is an oral transaction in which speakers aim to achieve a specific goal, in other words, they solve a task. The question of how being engaged in oral tasks can enhance the development of second language (L2) competence has long been in the centre of second language acquisition research. (Kormos, 2011, p. 39)

This task-centred interaction is natural in first language. But, formal second language learning has its cardinal deficiency inherent in it—the absence of a felt need on the part of the learner, and the consequent lack of motivation. One effective way of overcoming this barrier is to

camouflage the child's consciousness by getting him engaged in some interesting activities and simultaneously interacting him through the target language, so that the child does not feel the tedium of concentrating on the structural features of that language. The child is unaware of the form of the medium, since he is focusing on the functions—seeking support, getting help, problem solving step by step partly independently and partly with adult help. On such occasions, what the adult provides may be natural input, that is comprehensible to the child—how to fix the wheel of the toy car, how to tighten the seatbelt, why to wash vegetables many times before cutting, why to turn the TV off during lightning, when to turn the stove off while cooking, where the first aid kit must be kept and why, what things are needed for making a model of something and so on. The language that the child processes from input into intake on all these occasions is functional in nature, subconscious is the mode of assimilation, or to borrow Vygotsky's term 'internalization' or 'interiorization', and language is embedded in the content (e.g., how to arrange the balloons for the birthday party).

### **Instructional Package for Experience-Mediated Learning**

The remaining part of this paper tries to develop a package of specimen materials and adequate teaching-learning strategies in support of the argument made so far, that is, learners are likely to get engaged in communicating in English if they are allowed to showcase the 'great things' they have done for their parents, neighbours, school, immediate society, and for themselves. There must be certain facts about each learner that remain unknown to the rest, including their teachers. The urge to recall those acts of success (fruitful labours) from real life, and those moments in which they felt proud of themselves are likely to lead to self-expression and self-actualization. If opportunities are provided for telling others about these chunks of 'information gaps', they may overcome barriers of communication such as inhibition and fear.

For the sake of convenience to distinguish the package of instructional strategies and materials from the celebrated experiential learning, let me call the former as 'experience-mediated learning'. In a rather restricted sense, or as a diluted version, man's relation with his environment has been undertaken here to study the child, by placing him in his environment, and observing him in terms of the activities he performs individually, independently, and in collaboration with others.

The activities that learners are engaged in, both at home and outside (including school), and thereby a major part of their lived experience, have been suggested to be integrated into the classroom learning experience. A blueprint of the framework for carrying out the proposed package of classroom strategies has been outlined below.

- (a) Awareness sessions for parents by the teacher: Inform parents about the project: its objectives and modalities. Ensure their support—in both the contents of the activities that the child does in collaboration with them at home (e.g. cleaning the bicycles and other two wheelers), and whatever little amount of language (English) they can provide during the activities.
- (b) Preparatory work by the tutor: Make a list of activities that children are usually engaged in. The list will be heavily dependent on, and will be reflecting the immediate sociocultural realities. For example, if the school is located in a coastal village, the children may naturally be associated with hundreds of activities related to fishing at home and around.
- (c) Group and sub-group those activities, that children are likely to do independently and in collaboration with adults, according to their domains—e.g., Domain of activity: Fishing. Helping adults to repair boats, clean and keep the boat ready for sail, carry necessary articles and food for male adults who go for fishing, sorting fish, carrying baskets to market or home, etc. Another domain of children's activities in a village may be local shopping.
- (d) Let the exhaustive list be displayed on the classroom walls in English, but each item preceded by the equivalent in the mother tongue. List of activities belonging to each domain—fishing, shopping, cooking, sales, preserving fish etc.—may be displaced separately on various parts of the walls.
- (e) Let the teacher add more activities to each domain, even more domains too, with the help of children. This is very important, since this is the crucial part of learning. Children supply more and more activities to each domain; teacher provides the English equivalents too.
- (f) Every day, a small part of the class time is set apart for reporting the main activities of the previous few days. They may begin with lists and details displayed on the walls, and proceed by recalling

events of the past, and then grouping them under various domains (kitchen help, vehicle work, shopping ...). Narration using the past tense, the simplest of all tenses, is the mode of reporting. Reporting can be in small groups, or large groups of about 10 each. (The narrations in the form of reports in the initial stage can be replaced by plans for future in higher classes, where they employ various sentence patterns for expressing futurity in English (e.g., simple present, present continuous, be+ going to+ main verb, auxiliaries etc.)

- (g) The teacher and the better performers in each group who function as team leaders provide the missing links in terms of both content (after eliciting details from the narrator in mother tongue), and better language in terms of grammar and vocabulary.
- (h) The teacher reproduces the report which originally was in first person (e.g. *Yesterday was Saturday. No class. After breakfast, I went with Dad to our shop in the market. Dad opened the shop and arranged things in their places. Then he went to the wholesale shop. I was in charge of the shop. I knew the price list by heart. But, not the prices of vegetables. They change every day.*)
- (i) Teacher's version: *Do you know what Vahid did yesterday? He was in charge of his dad's shop in the market for about an hour. He sold things and collected money. He noted down everything.*
- (j) The better performers, working in small groups prepare write-ups (about 100 words each) on all students and their selected activities. The teacher edits them. Willing parents, taking turn, take computer print, and weekly / fortnightly / monthly magazine is released.

But, it may be noted here that what is proposed in this paper is not a replica of the much-established experiential learning, though the term 'experience' forms the core of both. Moreover, experiential learning as pioneered by David A. Kolb, and inspired by works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget has already been established as a method of teaching-learning by itself, whereas what this paper proposes is simply a framework for designing a package of meaningful classroom strategies. Apart from this major difference in the overall structure, these two pedagogical constructs operate at different levels, using the raw material of the learner's experience in different modes and at different levels.

## Conclusion

Child's interaction with adults in problem solving, the school providing opportunities for the child to showcase his services to others, collaborative labour, collective thinking and communication, parental intervention in instruction, making use of the potentials of the first language in learning a second language—these are some of the main factors that may prove this package a success in the classroom.

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