Sociocultural theory and Second Language Acquisition

by Ivana Banković, country representative of the Erasmus Mundus Student and Alumni Association for Serbia

Key words: Sociocultural theory, SLA, Mediation, Internalization, ZPD

The socio-cultural theory explains children's learning and development and allows one to better understand children's learning and the influence of both adults and peers on the learning process. From this perspective, children are seen as active participants in the learning process whose capacities are influenced by the culture of the environment in which they develop (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2008).

The socio-cultural theory, initially proposed by Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1987) refers to the human learning processes in general, which includes language learning. Later researchers, such as Lantolf, Donato, Thorne, Pavlenko, Swain and Lapkin and others (see Lantolf, 2000b), extended Vygotsky's theory to second language acquisition, and focused mainly on how second language acquisition can be explained through the socio-cultural perspective, that is, how second language learners acquire language when they collaborate and interact with other speakers.

The core of socio-cultural theory is that learning and cognitive development (which includes language as well) happen as a result of social interactions. It argues that "while human neurobiology is a necessary condition for higher order thinking, the most important forms of human cognitive activity develop through interaction within social and material environments" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, p. 201). Such cultural and linguistic settings include family life, peer groups, schooling and organized sports activities. In other words, interactions with people and artefacts from the environment are essential in the development of thinking.

Socio-cultural theory considers language as an important mediational tool in the development of higher mental processes of learners (Vygotsky, 1986). It helps the development of these processes since it enables the developing communicative and cognitive functions to move from 'the interpsychological' to 'the intrapsychological plane' (Vygotsky, 1987) that is, from the social to the personal level. This requires active engagement of children in social interactions with peers and adults (Lantolf, 2000a; Rogoff, 1990). As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) argue, children have agency and intentions

which enable them to learn and construct their understandings through interaction with the environment.

Therefore, from the socio-cultural perspective language is of interest not only for communication but for thought itself, in its functional sense. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain, socio-cultural theory views speaking and thinking as "tightly interwoven" (p. 47) people internalize what is being said in the communicative process (by them as well as by others) and through this activity they gain control over their mental processes, or in other words speaking mediates thinking.

The opportunity to use language as a means of making sense of experiences with others is a crucial step in learning to use language meaningfully, appropriately and effectively (Park, 2005). It enables the child to internalize the language and carries it into further performance. The value of imitation is also emphasized for children's language learning, arguing that internalization through imitation is not a matter of just miming and copying but entails an active, and frequently creative, reasoning process (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a; Speidel & Nelson, 1989; Tomasello, 2005). This explains why role-play and make-belief/pretend play are so important for young children's development.

Swain and Lapkin (2002) argue that the production of language pushes learners to process language more deeply. The situations in which learners prepare to express themselves, before they start speaking or writing, demand paying much more attention to how thoughts are expressed linguistically than is the case in language comprehension activities. Thus, the authors advocate for more opportunities in which students would be able to engage in verbal expression. Swain (2000) maintains that in collaborative dialogues "language use and language learning can co-occur. It is language use mediating language learning. It is cognitive activity and it is social activity" (p. 97). All this emphasises the importance of active participation for language acquisition.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD), together with mediation and internalisation, is another core concept of socio-cultural theory. It is defined 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" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In other words, a child may be able to complete more cognitively demanding tasks if s/he has the right support from an adult or a peer. ZPD is seen as a metaphorical site where a learner and an interlocutor co-construct knowledge and the emphasis in ZPD is placed on development,

co-construction of knowledge among learners in interaction with interlocutors or in private speech (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The assumption is that what a child was once able to achieve with the help of others, s/he will be able to achieve on his/her own in the future.

Play is a particularly important activity in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development. Through play, children create a zone of proximal development in collaboration with others, in which they perform beyond their current abilities since they have the support of others (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997). With regard to SLA, different researchers, such as Savile-Troike (1988), Cook (1997; 2000), Lantolf (1997), Broner and Tarone (2001) and others, have repeatedly documented the occurrence of language play and recognized its importance in the process of acquisition for both children and adults.

References:

Anning, A., Cullen, J., & Fleer, M. (2008). Research contexts across cultures. In A. Anning, J. Cullen, & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (pp. 1–15). London: Sage Publications.

Broner, M. A., & Tarone, E. E. (2001). Is it fun? Language play in a fifth-grade Spanish immersion classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, *85*(3), 363–379.

Cook, G. (1997). Language play, language learning. *ELT Journal*, *51*(3), 224–231.

Cook, G. W. D. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lantolf, J. P. (Ed.). (2000b). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006a). Sociocultural theory and second language learning. In B. VanPatten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition: an introduction* (pp. 201–224). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006b). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. M. (2006). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Park, E. S. (2005). *A case study of young Korean children's English learning experiences in the United States: a sociocultrual perspective*. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg. Retrieved from http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-06292005-222143/

Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re) construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155–177). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Saville-Troike, M. (1988). Private speech: Evidence for second language learning strategies during the' silent' period. *Journal of Child Language*, *15*(3), 567–590.

Speidel, G. E., & Nelson, K. E. (1989). A fresh look at imitation in language learning. In G. E. Speidel & K. E. Nelson (Eds.), *The many faces of imitation in language learning* (pp. 1–21). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 97–114). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2002). Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *37*(3-4), 285–304.

Tomasello, M. (2005). *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky: Problems of general psychology*. (R. Rieber & A. Carton, Eds.). New York: Plenum Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1997). *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky: volume 3: Problems of the theory and history of psychology*. (R. W. Rieber & J. Wollock, Eds.) (1st ed.). New York: Plenum Press.

****

Ivana Banković is an English language teacher and an Early Childhood professional. After earning her degree in the English language and literature from the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac in 2006, she worked as an English language teacher for four years. Following that, she enrolled the International Master in Early Childhood Education and Care organized jointly by Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway, Dublin Institute of Technology. Ireland and University of Malta and graduated in 2012. Her professional interests include EFL/ESL teaching, TEYL, early childhood studies and children's rights. She is comited to enhancing the quality of experience of educational settings for all children. She is a country representative of the Erasmus Mundus Student and Alumni Association for Serbia. Contact Ivana at ivanabankovickg@gmail.com.