

An English Town in China Guided by Sociocultural Theory, Identity Theory and Conversation Analysis

Introduction

In China, students learn English as a foreign language (EFL). According to Xinhua Net, (2014), there are 400 million students learning English in China, while the overall proficiency level is only penultimate in Asia. A lot of people perceive Chinese learning English as “mute English”, which means one can only do English exercises rather than interacting with people. This is mostly caused by the traditional “grammar translation” teaching method. To solve that, in this paper, I will present an English town, operating under the guidelines developed under the lens of sociocultural theory, identity approach, and conversation-analytic approach. First of all, all three theories will be introduced, including their major constructs, principles, and claims, followed by some recent studies regarding to these theories, and last present the guidelines of the English town.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

SCT has its origin from the great Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. It argues that cultural artifacts, activities and concepts mediate human’s mental process, including language. In this perspective, language acquisition is not solely a cognitive process, i.e., how brains perceive input, either as a skill, or a concept. SCT takes culture into

consideration, and states how cultural factors can impact our mental activity of language acquisition. Several major concepts will be introduced as follows.

Mediation. Mediation is referred to higher level symbolic artifacts (physically existing or mentally perceived), which comes from the collection of social and cultural activity and development, as opposed to human mind, which consists of lower mental processes. In SCT-SLA specific, termed (object-, other, self-) regulation manifests mediation. It is used to assist/guide humans to learn L2.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD). It is the interspace between one's actual development level (the ability to solve a task alone) and potential development level (with guidance or collaboration). ZPD indicates what one can do independently in the future by appropriating cultural artifacts.

Dynamic Assessment (DA). DA unites ZPD, instruction and assessment. Traditional assessment aims to locate the current level of development while ZPD a form of assessment whose goal is to improve learners' performance during the assessment process itself with mediation and co-construction. DA comprises interactionist and interventionist DA.

Therefore, mediation is indispensable either in the development of ZPD or in DA. To reach further out to the potential level of ZPD, one needs mediation. Meanwhile, the purpose of DA is to help learners expand their ZPD, by assessing the actual development and providing the necessary mediation to achieve further understanding.

Scientific and everyday concepts. "Situational, empirical, and practical" are the characteristics of everyday concepts (Vygotsky, 1986). While in school, students are exposed

to scientific concepts (Vygotsky, 1986), which are “abstract, systematic relationships and definitions” (Swain et al, 2015). Swain et al (2015) explain, “Everyday (spontaneous) concepts are internalized from concrete, face-to-face experiences and contexts. ... Scientific concepts are systematic, hierarchical and subject to conscious manipulation.” Both contribute to learners’ acquisition process. We can perceive grammar rules as scientific concepts, for example, and applying rules in situated utterance under certain context as everyday concepts.

Activity theory. It was first proposed by Vygotsky and developed by his colleague Leont’ev. The “activity” here should be understood in a broader sense as Ryle (1999) thought “activity” was poorly translated in English from Russian, and in activity theory, it should be understood as “high-level, motivated thinking, doing and being of an individual in a given social context.” Activity theory intends to encompass “the dynamic interaction of the individual and the socially constructed practices, norms and institutions” (Swain et al, 2015). In another word, individuals’ minds are not the mere source of things we encounter, rather, the interactions among subjects, objects, mediational means, social norms, community, etc., are collectively contributing.

Identity Approach

Second language (L2) identity is different than the notion of a person’s identity in psychological perspective. Wenger (2000) defines that, “An identity is not an abstract idea or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or a personality trait. It is a lived experience of belonging (or not belonging). A strong identity involves deep connections with others

through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments.” Building on that, L2 identity is in process, constantly changing, and influenced by various factors. Therefore, identity approach aims to incorporate L2 learners and the social world, and in turn, explain how social world influences L2 learners. To understand the difference between motivation and investment, and the concepts of imagined identity and community is essential to comprehend identity approach in SLA.

Motivation and investment. Motivation can be divided into two categories: *instrumental motivation*, which corresponds to L2 learners’ inclination to pragmatic purposes, i.e., using L2 as a social/economical upward mobility, and *integrative motivation*, which corresponds to L2 learners’ inclination to socialize (integrate) into the target language community (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). On the other hand, *investment*, first introduced by Norton Peirce (1995), is the relationship between L2 learners and the target language, and their desire to learn and practice it. To use a metaphor to explain it, just like the word “investment” itself in economics, learners often invest their efforts, their attention into the process in language learning, and they hope that in return they would get interests (resources, competence) in their vault of linguistic capital. A simple example would be, a student who is a motivated student, instrumentally and integratively; he wants to learn L2 not only to find a good job in the future, but also eager to interact with people on the other side of the world. However, he doesn’t believe grammar instruction would help him to achieve his goal (meaning that he will not get “interests” for his investment), resulting in his negative participation in grammar class, which shows a sign of no/little investment.

Imagined identity and imagined community. L2 learners can use their imagination to get access to communities that they currently don't have access to, in which exists their imagined identities; and the aforementioned community is called imagined community. For example, an L2 learner who wants to go abroad for further study, s/he would start imagining how to order food in the restaurant or how to greet other native fellow students before actual departure. In this case, s/he is practicing his/her L2 in the imagined community using an imagined identity.

Under the construct of identity approach, we see that language acquisition cannot happen, or with little effect, with individual learning.

Conversation-Analytic Approach

Evolved from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis started to have its own theoretical construct and methodology in the field of SLA. It focuses mainly on the **interaction order** and **interactional competence** in naturally occurred daily and institutional conversations, in which researchers specifically look at turn taking, turn construction, sequence organization and repair. Therefore, under the lens of CA, language acquisition happens when people follow interaction order constructed historically and socially, through which they gain interactional competence, both as a threshold to participate in conversation and as the object to language learning, so as to achieve intersubjectivity.

To achieve objectivity, researchers normally do not pre-assume any identity of the participants; rather, identity is locally and contextually emerged during the process of

conversation. Meanwhile, researchers need to be cultural co-members of the participants in the conversation where the implicit social norms lie.

The argument of CA as a research method or a learning theory never ends. However, no matter which one it is, CA provides a particular way to look at how language acquisition takes place in detail and rich data for researchers to further explore.

Comparison to other SLA theories

The pivotal contrast between cognitivism and socialism in SLA is whether we see language acquisition happens in our mind through mental/language faculty or from a wider social aspect. Most of the cognitivist SLA theories dismiss the strong effect that social context brings to individuals. Then, why do people behave differently in various social contexts? Why L2 learners can understand “drive a coach and horse through” literally, but can’t understand the true meaning as “to make something ineffective”? SLA has to take social aspect into account in order to make sense of such phenomena. Having said that, in the socialism camp, socialization theory and sociocognitive theory make sense at the first sight, however, they tend to include too many constructs so that every phenomenon can be explained. They seem to be able to explain the complex nature of SLA, but in fact, the claims in the theories are so general that they can be applied to anything. For example, in sociocognitive theory, if everything in the world is cognition and learners can align with everything, there is surely no denying the theory can explain everything, while at the meantime, doesn't really explain anything.

Prior Works on Theories

In this section, several studies regarding to SCT, identity approach and conversation analysis will be introduced, to help us deeper understand the theoretical construct of the theories, and to see how we can apply these theories in pedagogical settings.

Sociocultural Theory

SCT is one of the most teaching-related SLA theories as it provides practical means to embody the key constructs in the theory. For example, ZPD was believed to belong to an individual, and everybody may have different ZPDs, whereas Guk and Kellogg (2007) argue, instead, a whole class ZPD can be created. An interesting metaphor used by them is that teachers are tram drivers rather than rickshaw puller. The classroom data show that teacher mediation, as well as student-student interaction can co-construct a whole class ZPD. Despite the fact that student interactions contain less metalanguage and less accuracy, the absolute high number of learner utterances comparing to the teacher's shows students' mediations to each other, and further facilitating internalization. Combining the teacher's and the students' mediation, a whole class ZPD is accomplished. This uplifts the practicality of applying ZPD to the classroom to another level. It also fits to the mainstream belief of transforming teachers from a lecturer to a facilitator, felicitating students to explore their ZPD.

Another teaching-related concept in SCT is dynamic assessment. Shrestha and Coffin (2012) did an empirical study on how tutors can use DA to develop academic writing. The study employed interactionist DA; tutors diagnosed learners' problematic area, and provided developmental and formative feedback. Learners were offered chances to revise with

mediation and develop their conceptual knowledge. They expressed that they felt relaxed and useful with this kind of assistance. This study shows how useful DA can be, and how tutees' ZPD can be explored and developed. Tutoring center is always one of the best places to implement DA for their one-to-one setting, and flexible agenda.

Identity Approach

L2 learners' identities are individually and socially constructed, and dynamic. It's vital to understand them so as to enhance the effectiveness of teaching. Anwaruddin (2012) attempted to raise the awareness that educators need to pay attention to learners' identities, by using students' autobiographies to understand students' L2 identities, and through which uncover the implications on pedagogy. From students' autobiographies, he found that, when students could have the liberty of doing things they really like, showing their own opinions, and could relate learning to their own life experiences, students would have more motivations and investments in their learning.

Conversational Analytic Approach

We'll look at conversation analysis from two viewpoints, as a research method and language learning theory.

He (2004) uses her data in her Chinese language classroom to argue that CA is a useful tool to examine, in rich detail, of the learning opportunities that emerge in conversations. Language acquisition is not a static process; to explain, we can't simply gauge SLA as how much learners will produce after what has been inputted into their minds. Instead, language acquisition is a dynamic problem solving process through interaction, and

CA can be used to scrutinize language acquisition and promote L2 learning and teaching. For example, Waring (2013) employs sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic practices to develop learners' interactional competence. The teacher repeatedly teaches how to carry out routine inquiries over the whole semester and learners turn out to be able to adapt their answers according to their understanding and the context. The teacher can create learning opportunities for the learners by asking questions that normally would end the conversation. Therefore, as teachers, they can actually optimize learning outcomes by adjusting conversations within the classroom; while as researchers, they can use CA data transcripts to see how these happen.

On the other hand, Hall (2004, 2010) argues that learners' extensive engagement in regularly occurring conversation in context constructs what learners will acquire. Involvement in conversation is, at least part of, how we learn language. That is how CA holds its place in the field of SLA as a learning theory. Furthermore, she emphasizes the difference between repair and correction in classroom, to show how CA can address the factors in SLA (Hall, 2007). Appropriate use of repairs by teachers can be implicitly uptaken by learners, and hence improve learners' interactional competence, whereas excessive use of correction would undermine learners' motivation.

Pedagogical Design

Having explained how SLA can happen under the lens of SCT, CA and identity theory, now we will see how we can apply these theories in real life, in this case, an English

town/village in China.

Several countries, to name a few, Spain, Italy, and South Korea, have realized the concept “English town/village”. It simulates a language and cultural immersion environment to the students. It has infrastructure and public services, such as post offices, restaurants, theaters, and so forth. All the employees who will have direct interactions with the students are either native speakers of English or expert non-native speakers of English. Park & Oxford (1998) show that students improved their communicative competence, overcame their fear of communication, and gained confidence in speaking English after they attended the English Village program in South Korea. The only dissatisfaction that some students had was that the “English Only” policy was restriction and stress imposed on them rather than a source of motivation.

The setting of the English town this paper will present is essentially similar to the aforementioned harbingers, and how this town will be operationalized is guided by SCT, CA, and identity theory. The idea of building a town like this essentially agrees with the core value of SCT, that language learning and acquisition needs to be moved from human mind into the bigger social world.

The target audience of this town can be any Chinese students. The goal of this town is to improve their communicative competence, confidence in language learning and encourage their language use. For students who want to know more about foreign cultures, this town is also an ideal place to go.

The series of activities or classes that students can engage in in this town include

language workshops, task-based activities, content-based courses and tutoring center, all in this language and cultural immersion environment.

SCT believes that engagement in social and cultural activity is essential for second language acquisition, including physical material, and interaction with others, which can both be seen as meditational tools. Thus, immersing in an English-speaking environment, talking with people in English, looking at restaurant menus in English, can ultimately mediate learners to some level of internalization of the target language. That's the power of immersion.

Regardless, immersion alone is not enough. Language workshops aim to help students with pragmatics. For instance, people who have gone abroad must have this kind of experience: prior the actual ordering in a restaurant, one starts to imagine what the waiter/waitress will ask him and practice how he is going to answer in the target language. After he orders an egg sandwich just to avoid some follow-up questions, and the waitress asks what kind of bread he wants. He baffled. Nobody ever taught him how to name different kinds of bread. In the data from Canagarajah's migration study (not published yet), a few postdocs indicate that they can write papers without any difficulties while having trouble in communicating with people. Waring (2013) finds that teaching pragmatics in classroom such as daily routine inquiries are helpful and developmental to students' language learning. These language workshops are designed to facilitate students to transfer their scientific knowledge in the class to everyday concepts that they can freely use. Back to the friendly request example, teachers teach students that by using the past tense form of modal verbs can express

a sense of politeness, such as “Would you like...?” That’s the scientific knowledge in classroom. However, a lot of students never think of using it in a real-life situation and result in sounding rude. In the language workshops, we aim to teach students the pragmatic phrases and sentence structures, and also some cultural knowledge (like bread category) that they will soon encounter and use in the English town.

Task-based instruction is associated with the pragmatic language workshops. Students need to apply the pragmatic knowledge to a real-life situation. Sticking to the previous example of ordering a sandwich in a diner, this involves interactions with the waiter/waitress, which corresponds with the central concept that CA argues, that interactional competence is acquired from naturally occurred conversation. In addition, as SCT argues, by achieve their subgoal (in this case, buying a sandwich) can in time achieve their higher order goal (language acquisition). In general, completing a task can incidentally assist students in language learning.

In content-based course, students can choose subjects that they are interested in and be taught in English, such as music, math, science and so on. This creates huge investments and motivation for the students. People in the classroom are a group of students than share the same interest so they have the integrative motivation to engage in this group. They invest their attention and effort into this group and classroom so they can in return know more knowledge that especially care. During this process, language will be accidentally picked up. Besides, classroom is always the place with rich mediation. As *activity theory* implies, classroom is a dynamic system; teacher and students are actively co-constructing,

co-mediating through their interactions, textbooks, and involvements. Furthermore, teachers are the ones who can provide the most amounts of mediations because they are actively teaching. And to justify why only content-based courses are provided instead of just English course, the reason is that students in China have already been taught grammar and test-oriented classes for years. It's time that they can experience something new, and try to see how they apply what they have learned into a new context. Their prior knowledge in English is also a part of mediation in the whole "*activity*". Like the aforementioned Guk and Kellogg's study (2007), teachers can create a whole class ZPD to teach these content course in order to magnify the effectiveness.

Another advantage of having students that share the same interests gather around for classes is that it can embody their imagined identities and imagined communities, to physically experience how an English-instructed classroom is like. Students can learn how to appropriate voice and power in this simulated community, which can accelerate and facilitate their formation of L2 identities.

Last but not least, the tutoring center. Students can bring in any questions or problems they encounter in workshops, in their tasks, or in the courses related to language learning. It's a perfect place to use dynamic assessment and help students reach further in their ZPD. Because of the tutoring setting, tutors can use interactionist method when implementing the dynamic assessment so as to achieve better effect. Distinct from the English village in South Korea, native language is allowed in this tutoring center if the tutor can also speak Chinese. We have to make sure the interaction that tutors give are tailored to the students' need and

can be understood by the students. Whenever the tutor sees the potential ZPD of the student, s/he has to grasp the chance to provide enough mediation.

Conclusion

Among multitude of SLA theories, sociocultural theory, conversation analysis and identity theory put their focus on how social aspect mould our language learning, which perfectly fit into the context that I propose in this paper, an English town in China. Students who go to the town can learn pragmatic use of language and culture, which can be applied to real context in the town in task-based instruction; they can go to content courses, which create motivation and investment for the learners and embody their imagined identities and communities; they can bring problems they encountered in tasks or classes to the tutoring center, whose tutors will use dynamic assessment to help them. The whole town is operationalized under the theoretical constructs of SCT, CA, and identity theory, and eventually, I believe, students will benefit from this town.

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