

**The Relevance of Sociocultural Theory for Linguistic Skills
Development: Classroom Observations**
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Abstract

Linguistics deals with how language is acquired and sociocultural theory focuses on the role of society in language acquisition. Successful language acquisition is a product of living a linguistic society for a prolonged period of time. Sound cognizance of this vital association between linguistic skills development and the role of society is deemed pivotal for modern language teachers. However, teacher-centeredness in many settings, results in students' weak linguistic skills. This research aimed to deconstruct the relevance and significance of sociocultural theory in foreign language teaching, i.e., to determine the nature of interaction and communicative activities in English-major classes in a Saudi public university. An observation tool with six instruments was used. The data were analysed for themes and frequencies. The findings indicated very little support for the development of learners' linguistic skills. Very little interaction among learners was noted. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers despite highest academic qualifications teachers often need professional training to help them increase meaningful exchange of knowledge among learners.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, linguistic skills, ELT

Introduction

Effective interaction among learners in a language classroom is mandatory for successful development of linguistic (communicative) skills. To achieve this goal, the element of interaction is stressed upon in sociocultural theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The present research highlights the importance and need of sociocultural theory as instructors in language classrooms are faced with the challenge of developing students' higher order linguistic skills through interaction and communicative activities. Language teachers are required to involve learners in relevant, interesting and meaningful communicative activities. The present study was an attempt to determine the nature and degree of meaningful interaction in a Saudi public university English-major classes and evaluate the extent to which the classroom environment was

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supportive for learners' linguistic skills development. Thus the following two questions were sought answers for:

1. *How much do teachers involve BS-English students in meaningful interaction?*
2. *To what extent are the classrooms supportive to students' linguistic skills development?*

Literature Review

Lev Vygotsky (1869-1934) describes human learning as a social interaction to which the mind of an individual is a part only. Contrary to Chomsky (1959) and Krashen's (1981, 1982) mentalist theories, sociocultural theory views human learning as a process of interaction between an individual, society and social contexts. Culture or society equips children with distinctive intellectual tools to enhance their higher order cognitive processes. Society achieves this aim through collaborative, properly mediated and meaningful activities.

Literature on language classroom environment ascribes the most important role to teacher. Teacher is responsible to facilitate productive interaction in classroom (Vygotsky, 1987; Hu, 2010). Facilitating meaningful through communicative activities is fundamental to successful second language learning (Vygotsky, 1987; Littlewood, 1981). Hence, mediation and meaning are considered central to successful learning (Eun & Lim, 2009; Aimin, 2013) as learning a language is a social process and in language education this process takes place mostly in classroom, a mini society that allows learners develop their language skills (Donato, 2000) that in turn is a reconstruction of another self in the target language (Pavleno & Lantolf, 2000). However, the efficacy of the new process or reconstruction of the other self is predicated on effective linguistic tasks rather than trivial activities, tasks that are truly motivating and incremental in active participation of learners (Vygotsky, 1997). CLT approach though apparently has emerged years after Vygotsky's sociocultural theory but operates along the same line. In fact if deeply analysed CLT appears to have surfaced to support and materialize the concept of sociocultural theory (Littlewood, 1981). CLT considers communicative activities mandatory for successful language. It requires teacher to be facilitator of communication in classroom i.e., allowing learners to have maximum interaction in the target language.

Previous research has endorsed and emphasised the significance of sociocultural factors that play a critical role in learning a second

language (Wrestsch, 1985). Empirical evidences gathered show that learners' involvement in classroom activities is incremental in developing communicative and cognitive skills (Yang, 2016). Yang (2016) noticed that CLT provides a real-life like society to learners where they interact on the basis of situations connected to real life outside. In addition, learning is far better than traditional teacher-centred classroom where learners operate individually and passively (Dongyu, Fanyu&Wanyi, 2013). Teacher training, however, is a must to make the merger of sociocultural theory and CLT in classroom a success (Amerian, Ahmadian, & Mehri, 2014).

Methodology

This research is based on classroom observations. Eighteen purposively selected lessons of five teachers were observed. Though the BS program included courses other than linguistic skills only those teachers were selected who taught linguistic courses—three PhD holders and the other two held BS in English. The observation tool was adapted from Watanabe (1997) with six instruments (classroom information sheet; teacher background sheet; materials description sheet; types of exercises; notes-taking sheet and sixth impression description sheet. The data were collected over a period of two months for 900 minutes.

Findings

This section provides analysis of the 18 lessons of the five teachers observed. The data collection began with observing teacher A. His five lessons were observed. As can be seen in Table 1 below, a major part of every lesson was spared for students' reading. Out of one hundred and forty minutes of the speaking lessons, 69 minutes were used by students' reading; whereas the students speaking time in all three lessons was 54 minutes. Similarly, more than half of the time of the grammar lessons was utilised for the students' loud reading. Thus, out of 243 minutes only 31% of the total time was availed by some of the students for speaking whereas more than half of the time of the total time of teacher A's lessons (52%) was consumed by reading of a few students and the teacher's explanation of the content. The students' speaking time does not mean that every student took part in the reading or speaking activities; rather, it was those students who volunteered to participate in the activities. Similarly, only one or two students were made to read the exchanges of dialogues of specific units followed by teacher explanation.

In addition, the students' reading in the grammar lessons was more of a ticking, underlining, and marking the specific items of particular exercise as deemed important from exam point of view rather than reading for comprehension.

Table 1: Activities in Teacher A's lessons

Activities			Student Reading	Student Speaking	Teacher Speaking	Total Time
Situational English	Lesson		minutes	minutes	minutes	Total
	1	At the Restaurant	*26	**27	7	60
	2	Describing People	*13	**27	10	50
	3	At the Bank	*30	--	--	30
			69	54	17	140
	4	Past Simple and Past Progressive	24	14 (quiz)	20	58
	5	Revision	***35	10	--	45
Total			128	78	37	243
Percentage			52.6%	31.4%	15.2%	100%

Note: Students speaking or reading does not mean the whole class was involved in the activity. As can be seen in the narrative vignettes, only a few students were invited to take part in the activities.

* Only one student read the text throughout the lesson.

** The students were scanning through pages and marking specific pages and exercise explained quickly by the teacher.

Table 2 below shows the time allocated by teacher B for the major activities of his 'paragraph writing' lesson that he announced was about using adjectives. The entire lesson unfolded in the form of teacher's speaking and explanation. Out of the total time the teacher's speaking time was 30 minutes, approximately 70% of the lesson. Only 5 and 8 minutes were used for students' speaking and writing respectively. However, only a small number of students of teacher B class either wrote something or responded to the teacher's questions and observations.

Table 2: Activities in Teacher B's lessons

Activities			Student Reading	Student Speaking	Student Writing	Teacher Speaking	Total Time
Paragraph Writing	Lesson		minutes	minutes	minutes		Total
	1	Using Adjectives					
	Percentage			11.6	18.6	70	10

Note: The teacher spoke throughout the lesson apart from the last 8 minutes when the class was busy in writing.

* As can be seen in the narrative vignette of teacher B, the students were scanned through specific pages and exercises while the teacher was explaining them.

**Only 5 out of 31 students participated through responding to the teacher's questions occasionally.

***Though the whole class was asked to write three sentences, only one student could do so.

Table 3 below includes the activities recorded in the lessons of teacher C. In total four lessons of teacher C were observed. The total time of the lessons reordered was 161 minutes. The teacher used about 90% of the total time. Very little time was spared for students' activities. In one of the translation lessons, the students wrote, in fact copied, a few sentences written by the teacher on white board. Similarly, in one of the Discussion-in-English lessons only five students read one by one some sentences from the pieces of a paper in their hands loudly. This was supposed to be a group presentation that lasted for about seven minutes.

Table 3: Activities in teacher C's lessons

Activities			Student Speaking	Student Writing	Teacher Speaking	Total Time
Types of Translation	Lesson		minutes	minutes	minutes	Total
	1	Free and Literal Translation				
	2	Types of Translation	--	5	**43	48

Discussion in	Lesson		Time	minutes	minutes	minutes	Total
	1	Presentation		***7	--	30	37
	2	Revision		--	--	27	27
Total				7	5	149	161
Percentage				5	3	92	100

*The students copied the points that the teacher wrote on white board.

**The lessons were in the form of lectures.

***Only five students read out some sentences from a piece of paper which took about 7-8 minutes in total.

Four lessons of Teacher D were observed for 163 minutes in total. All of his lessons were of the course 'Applied Linguistics'. He used a single teaching method. He had some students read a few lines from the book followed by his explanation. In each of the lessons he made eight to twelve students read some sentences. Though teacher his did involve students in reading but in fact it was only vocalisation of the words.

Table 4: Activities in Teacher D's lessons

Activities			Student Reading	Student Writing	Teacher Speaking	Total Time
Applied Linguistics	Lesson		minutes	minutes	minutes	Total
	1	Communicative Competence	--	--	*41	41
	2	Teaching Grammar	--	--	*36	36
	3	Monitor Theory	--	--	**46	46
	4	Monitor Theory	--	--	**40	40
Total			0	0	163	163
Percentage			0%	0%	100%	100%

*The teacher made some students read 2 to 3 lines turn by turn from the (course) book. While the students were reading the text, the teacher explained the concepts.

**The teacher delivered a lecture and wrote a few points on white board which the class copied as notes.

Four IELTS lessons of teacher E were observed for 183 minutes. He used sample published IELTS tests. In the first lesson of listening, the students did only 10 minutes listening. The rest of the lesson was used for teacher speaking. Similarly, less than half of the time was consumed by students in reading in the reading lesson. The total time of the writing lessons was about 91 minutes. The students took one third of the time to attempt the writing tasks whereas more than half of the time was taken by teacher's speaking. Thus 6% of the total time was used for listening, 14% for reading and 16% for writing whereas the teacher's speaking time was recorded about 64% was of the total time.

Table 5: Activities in Teacher E's lessons

Activities			Student Listening	Student Reading	Student Writing	Teacher Speaking	Total Time
I E L T S	Lesson		minutes		minutes	minutes	Total
	1	Academic Listening	10		--	46	56
	2	Academic Reading	--	16	--	20	36
	3	Academic Writing	--	--	20	25	45
	4	Academic Writing		*10	10	26	46
Total			10	26	30	117	183
Percentage			6	14	16	64	100

*The students read the model answer given at the end of the book.

Class Work Types in the Lessons of Teacher A, B, C, D and E

The first part of the observation check list about the work types, i.e., lockstep, paired work, group work, or students' individual work. A brief description of the class work type of each lesson observed is offered below. Table 6 below indicates class work type in teacher A's lessons. Five lessons of teacher A were observed. Lesson one, two and three were based on speaking skills whereas four and five were grammar lessons. Though a major part of the lessons was teacher centred, even then there were high lockstep activities in the grammar lessons. Similarly, lesson one and two had a fair amount of lockstep and individual work respectively. However, on the whole paired work, group work and students' individual work was either unknown or very low.

Table 6: Class work types in the lessons of teacher A

Teacher A	Lockstep					Pair work					Group work					Individual work				
	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
	S	S	S	S	G	S	S	S	S	G	S	S	S	G	G	S	S	G	G	G
	3	0	2	4	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	3	2	1	1

Key, p. L1= lesson 1, L2=Lesson 2, L3= Lesson 3, L4= Lesson 4, L5 = Lesson 5

Key of Lessons: S = Speaking, G= Grammar

Key for the scale from unknown to extremely high: unknown = 0, extremely low = 1, low = 2, fair = 3, high = 4, extremely high = 5

Table 7 shows teacher B's lesson. His one lesson was observed because of the nature of his teaching schedule. The lesson was completely lockstep. Though a little individual work was observed but that was very low and limited to a few individuals.

Table 7: Class work types in the lesson of teacher B

Class Work Type	Lockstep	Pair work	Group work	Individual work
Teacher B	L1	L1	L1	L1
	3	0	0	1

* L1= lesson 1

Key for the scale from unknown to extremely high: unknown = 0, extremely low = 1, low = 2, fair = 3,

The class work type of teacher C is shown in Table 8. Four lessons of teacher C were observed. He taught two different lessons as mentioned earlier. However, his teaching strategy was more or less the same. All of his lessons were lectures. There was a lot lockstep work in his translation lessons where the students voluntarily kept copying the points written on board. Not a single instance of paired or group work was noted in his four lessons and the students' individual work, if there was any, was very low and limited to a few students.

Table 8: Class work types in the lessons of teacher C

Class Work Type	Lockstep				Pair work				Group work				Individual work			
Teacher C	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	T	T	T	T	T	T	S	S	T	T	S	S	T	T	T	T
	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0

Key, p. L1= lesson 1, L2=Lesson 2, L3= Lesson 3, L4= Lesson 4

Key of Lessons, p. T = Translation, S= Speaking

Key for the scale from unknown to extremely high, p. unknown = 0, extremely low = 1, low = 2, fair = 3, high = 4, extremely high = 5

Teacher D and E's lessons as were quite similar to teacher B and C. For example, the major part of the class work of teacher D was lockstep but unlike teacher C it was very low. There was no paired or group work in teacher D's lessons. As far as students' individual work was concerned, it was extremely low which was limited to some students not the entire class and that was in the form of students' loud reading of two or three sentences from the book followed by the teacher's explanation. Likewise, teacher E's lessons were a replica of teacher D's

lessons. Nonetheless, the lockstep work in teacher E's lessons was higher than teacher D and for that reason the students were more involved in spite of complete absence of activities.

Table 9: Class work types in the lessons of teacher D

Class Work Type	Lessons		Lockstep	Pair work	Group work	Individual work
Teacher D	L1	Communicative Competence	2	0	0	1
	L2	Teaching Grammar	2	0	0	1
	L3	Monitor Theory	2	0	0	1
	L4	Monitor Theory	2	0	0	1

Key, p. L1= lesson 1, L2=Lesson 2, L3= Lesson 3, L4= Lesson 4

Key for the scale from unknown to extremely high, p. unknown = 0, extremely low = 1, low = 2,

Table 10: Class work types in the lessons of teacher E

Class Work Type	Lockstep				Pair work				Group work				Individual work			
Teacher E	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	L	R	W	W	L	R	W	W	L	R	W	W	L	R	W	W
	2	3	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Key, p. L1= lesson 1, L2=Lesson 2, L3= Lesson 3, L4= Lesson 4

Key of Lessons, p. W = Writing, R = Reading, L= Listening

Key for the scale from unknown to extremely high, p. unknown = 0, extremely low = 1, low = 2, fair = 3, high = 4, extremely high = 5

The observation checklist was used to record the students' attitude and the classroom atmosphere. The students' attitude seemed to be affected by classroom atmosphere. The students' were relaxed and interacted with teacher and other students when the classroom environment was relaxed. For example, in the lessons of teacher A and E, and also to some extent in teacher C's lessons the students laughed quite often and answered the teacher's questions confidently whereas the lessons of teacher B and D were serious. The whole classes remained very serious with some students literally sleeping, particularly in teacher D's lessons.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research was guided by two questions. First, it attempted to determine if how the classroom environment looked like in terms of interaction among students. As reported in the literature review, from the

perspective of sociocultural theory social interaction is integral for successful learning (Block, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The results of this study do not indicate any meaningful interaction in classroom. The classroom did not serve as a linguistic community to help learners' develop their linguistic skills. None of the teachers used paired-work or group activities. Mostly students worked individually.

Linguistic skills (communicative competence) cannot be improved without meaningful communicative activities (Littlewood, 1981). The results show that the teachers made very little conscious efforts to facilitate meaningful interaction. Rather, apart from teacher A, the other teachers used most of the class time speaking themselves. Learners were given no chance to interact with their classmates. They had no opportunity to use their English, create their own sentences and demonstrate their pronunciation, a feature of highly traditional classroom and of course old-fashioned. It was noted that the students mostly they remained silent only listening the teachers. They did not practice what was being taught in the lessons. Thus no evidence of speaking practice was gathered. Therefore it cannot be said with certainty that if the learners having been taught in the same fashion over the previous semesters and continue to be taught with similar style would make any observable difference in their communicative skills in the future.

The second research question sought the extent to which the classroom environment was supportive to developing students' linguistic skills. Surprisingly the teachers with highest academic qualifications seemed to lack the basic principles of effective teaching. It was mainly teaching for the sake of teaching. Therefore, the findings indicate no English teaching training on the part of the teachers. Though three of them held PhD but the approach and activities in their classrooms were out-dated suggesting teachers not trained enough though holding highest qualifications may not create or produce learning environment truly conducive for developing learners' linguistic skills. These results confirm the observation of American et al. (2014) and Aimin (2013) who noted that English language teachers' professional training is a must to make the merger of Communicative Language Teaching and sociocultural theory a success.

Future research on this topic with experimental design may show the extent teachers with highest academic qualifications and with professional qualifications teach differently than those teachers with highest academic qualifications but having no substantial professional

qualifications. In the context of this research, it can be felt that without appropriate training in language teaching classroom practices are bound to become teacher-centred and traditional, and course learning outcomes remain unachieved.

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