

Conference Paper

Socio-Culture-Based Classroom Activities in Asia: Do They Work Effectively?

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Abstract

Many studies on Second Language Acquisition are carried out based on the sociocultural theory (SCT) to explore learners' potentials in learning a language. SCT which claims that learning language occurs when learners have the experience to use the language in interaction has been widely used as the basis of the teaching and learning in schools and higher education in Asia. More student-centered and collaborative activities with pair and group works are applied to increase students' participation and promote language learning within students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within this framework, learners try to expand their ZPD through the assistance from their peers and teacher as the scaffolding of the learning development. However, studies show that implementing the socio-culture-based classroom activities are not trouble-free regarding challenges faced by both sides of the students and the teachers. Consequently, it is essential to have an understanding of how the activities can best work to achieve meaningful learning which promotes the maximum development of students' actual and potential levels of learning. This paper presents a review of some research on socio-cultural-based education in the context of Asia and describes the findings, benefits and challenges to see how effective the activities are.

Keywords: socio cultural theory, classroom activities, benefits, challenges

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1. Introduction

It has been clearly noted that the aim of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is to enable the students to use English in effective communication both spoken and written. In fact, achieving this goal is uneasy especially in EFL settings where the exposure of English is limited merely in the classrooms. Unfortunately, the teaching of EFL provides little opportunity for the students to practice using the language. As a result, many school graduates still have difficulties in using English [11, 16]. For this reason, the teaching of English needs to focus on the development of the language skills which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Particularly with the productive skills of speaking and writing wherein students can perform their language use, the teaching of English needs to provide students more opportunities to practice these skills. By doing so, the students' learning development is likely to occur. Within this notion, the socio-cultural theory proposed by [17] which emphasizes that learning is social

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in nature and that the interaction among learners is essential seems to be relevant to be employed in the teaching of EFL.

With regard to the teaching of EFL, much of the research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is carried out based on the socio-cultural theory (SCT) to explore learners' potentials in learning a language. This theory of sociocultural perspectives on language and learning—views language use in real-world situations as fundamental, not ancillary, to learning [21]. The situations will enable students to use the target language effectively based on the environment as well the social and cultural settings. Hence, more student-centered and collaborative activities with pair and group works are applied to increase students' participation and promote language learning within students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within this framework, learners try to expand their ZPD through the assistance from their peers and teacher as the scaffolding of the learning development [2, 9]. Further, the SCT based activities provide students with the opportunities to develop the social skills based on cultural settings. This paper describes the review on several studies on SCT and SLA to show the effectiveness of SCT in the EFL setting especially in Asia where the idea of socio-cultural approach is emerging as the response to the Asian community.

2. Socio-Cultural Approach and Second Language Acquisition

The socio-cultural theory (SCT) is rooted from the perspective of [17] who claims that learning occurs through social interaction. In the field of language learning, SCT views that it is essential for a learner to use the target language to interact with other learners in order the language learning takes place. As it has been pointed out by [18] in [19] that "We could therefore say that it is through others that we develop into ourselves..." This is to say that learners need to interact with their social and cultural environment through participating in a broader range of joint activities and internalizing the social and collaboration skills. For this reason, SCT also refers to a broader framework developed by several researchers that involves the social and cultural factors impacting L2 learning and use [7].

The Vygotskian socio-cultural theory is similar to the cognitive approach in terms of understanding the development of cognitive process. However, one thing that makes it different from the others is that it recognizes the need of socio-culturally meaningful activities which enable the language learners develop their capacities through the use of the target language and the help of their teacher and peers [7, 21]. This infers that the approach is different from the cognitive approach in a sense that it emphasizes more on the development of learning through social interaction which enables students to learn from the expert (teacher) or the more able peers until they develop their capacities.

In regard to SCT, Vygotsky also introduces the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the area of potential learning that each learner could reach within a given developmental span under optimal circumstances and with the best possible support from the teacher and others in the environment. This infers that teacher in a socio-cultural classroom facilitates and supports the students to help them develop their language and cultural skills. For this reason, the learning activities are situated in cooperative and collaborative learning where students can work together to accomplish a task and apply the language during the learning interaction. It is through the cooperation and collaboration that students can learn each other the way to communicate ideas, share information, and learn others' culture. Especially in the context of EFL classrooms where the biggest chance of speaking in the target language is in the classroom settings, students need to be given the chance to use the language through more student-centered activities which are more likely to engage students in the learning and in the language use as well since they work actively to complete the tasks and to communicate using the target language.

Within the SCT, language use is more important than language acquisition. Hence, the activities in SCT are essential as they facilitate real use of language through communication and building a new understanding on the language and self-concept. This means that the target language is seen as a means of communication among individuals while the self-concept is constructed through participation in the social, cooperative, and collaborative activities by understanding self-identity, capacity, and potentials as well as understanding others. In other words, the goal of L2 teaching in SCT is not the acquisition of language features where set of rules and patterns are memorized but language use through communication in the target language.

In the notion of socio-cultural approach, language learners are exposed to language forms in such situations which enable them to use the language for the purposes of cultural, social, and political communicative contexts. In that way, the learning becomes more meaningful since students apply the language for meaningful interaction and thus they become competent users of the target language. This enables them to practice using the language as both the process and product of learning. The exposure to English during the daily classroom activities is an attempt to facilitate students in their learning as they have the experience of using the language and gain knowledge about the language from the interactions. To make the optimal learning occurs, the teaching and learning activities need to be designed carefully considering the learners' characteristics and the types of support or scaffolding they need. In the context of EFL learning, scaffolding is essential to make the learning development occurs. This should be within the key theoretical features of good scaffolding consisting of redefining the task to arrive at a shared understanding, interest, and high motivation on the task, providing help based on ongoing analysis on the students' development, and fading the help when the students are ready to internalize their constructed knowledge into

application [8]. This implies that SCT emphasizes the role of mediation in the interaction between the novice and expert during the learning process. Socio-cultural theory, thus, describes how the expert or the teacher in the scaffolding role provides opportunities for the students.

3. Socio-Cultural Approach and Research in EFL

The framework of SCT has influenced the way EFL teachers teach and assess. More student-centered activities are employed in classrooms where students work in small groups. Research has also been conducted which accommodates the application of the approach in the classroom settings. Studies which lay the foundation on SCT such as cooperative and collaborative learning yield various results with regard to the effects on students' learning. The first is on the development of collaboration skills. Studies on collaboration in L2 writing show that working collaboratively to produce a joint product where a more able peer transfers his knowledge and skills to the less able peer can contribute to the higher quality of the writing in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and organization [5, 6, 14, 20] and the development of social and collaboration skills [4, 5]. Students working in collaboration generate better writing compared to students working individually in terms of the task fulfillment, grammatical accuracy, and text complexity. Further, the collaboration facilitates the students in constructing knowledge, collecting information and correcting each other's language errors.

A study by [1] revealed that collaborative writing had significant effect on students' writing performance particularly in the idea development and the rich of content. This is due to the collaboration which puts students into group work where they can brainstorm and make outline to generate ideas. Meanwhile, a study by [10] figured out that students' reading comprehension improved significantly after they work in collaborative reading activities that improve their skills and understanding. This infers that the SCT approach facilitates students' learning engagement within small groups and thus increases their social and collaboration skills as they learn from each other.

The second advantage is that working in socio-cultural based activities increases students' motivation and L2 proficiency as they are more engaged in the learning activities [12, 13, 15]. The investigation by [12] found that the socio-cultural teaching strategy through teacher and peer scaffolding improves the students' reading comprehension in which the students working in small groups to comprehend texts achieved significant improvement compared to the control group. This infers that the collaboration work promotes students' learning and increases their motivation as it establishes positive learning atmosphere compared to the traditional, control group. Another investigation by [15] reveals that collaboration reduces students' anxiety

and stress. The students in the experimental group showed less stress in speaking after they worked in collaborative activities because of the relaxed atmosphere of the learning environment which provided opportunities for students to support each other so that they felt more comfortable in learning. Particularly in EFL classrooms, learning atmosphere needs to be made as comfortable as possible that the language learning can take place. This affirms that the collaboration helps the students in reducing stress as they practice using the language in the group before they perform.

However, the research findings suggest that the pair or small groups be heterogeneous containing students with various levels of English proficiency which promotes the interaction and learning. By doing so, the less able students can learn from their more able peers while the latter may sharpen their skills and knowledge through transferring information to the less able ones.

4. The Implications in ELT

As it has been pointed out, studies on the role of SCT in foreign language learning have revealed that learning development is likely to occur when students have the opportunities to use the target language through interaction with their peers. However, studies show that implementing the socio-culture-based classroom activities are not trouble-free regarding challenges faced by both sides of the students and the teacher. Working in small groups may make the activities complicated and thus challenges may occur [3, 20]. First, working in cooperation and collaboration may bring tension among the group members as two or more heads need to compromise to arrive at agreement. Second, working in small groups may be challenging due to imbalanced participation among the group members with regard to the dominant and passive members. Finally, students who are already familiar with teacher-centered activities may be resistant to the more student-centered activities. If this occurs, students may be reluctant to participate in the activities which may eventually hinder their development in EFL learning.

To overcome these problems, [3] suggests that teachers set the goals clearly, provide interesting topics, encourage the students in the value of collaboration, train the students on how to collaborate, encourage the students to negotiate, find agreement when a conflict happens, and provide help when it is necessary. Accordingly, teachers need to have thorough understanding on applying socio-cultural based activities which enhance students' development in language learning. Moreover, teachers also need to be selective in providing scaffolding which helps promote students' active learning. The support that teachers provide should be given appropriately so that it may not hinder the maximum learning development.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

All in all, the teaching and learning of EFL with more student-centered activities based on socio-cultural approach can facilitate the students to develop their optimal learning. The classrooms activities which provide students the opportunities to practice using the language and accomplishing tasks in small groups develop their language skills as well as the communication and collaboration skills. The development of theories in SLA including the SCT contributes to the development or changes in how practitioners view EFL learning. Particularly in the setting of Asia where the Asian community is an emerging essential issue, students need to develop their skills in collaboration which enable them to participate in the interaction based on the social and cultural environment. Studies show that the socio-cultural approach brings benefits to students' language learning and that it is effective provided that some conditions are maintained.

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