A Review of Sociocultural Theory in the Field of Second Language Acquisition

Zena Abu Shakra
Arab Open University, Lebanon

Abstract: *Although increased attention has been given to sociocultural theory in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), only the surface has been scratched. The following paper provides a brief review of some of the sociocultural research which has been done in the field of SLA. The review is divided into four general areas: criticism of SLA research framed in the message model of communication; deficiencies in common instructional practices; the role of private speech in 2nd language learning; and discourse strategies for semiotic mediation. The review concludes by noting that sociocultural theory may be particularly enriching and relevant to the field of SLA because the acquisition of a language is after all first and foremost a social activity.*

1. Introduction

While sociocultural theory has been applied to various fields of educational research, much still needs to be done in terms of second language acquisition (SLA) research (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995). Sociocultural theory has its origins in the ideas of Lev Vygotsky (1978) whose theory emphasized the social dimension of the learning process; knowledge and learning as being mediated through language and discourse in social use. The task of sociocultural theory is actually to explain the relationship between human action and the context in which it occurs (Wertsch 1998). In general, sociocultural theory takes the stance that sociocultural factors and cognition are interdependently tied together in a relationship that is semiotically mediated. Drawing from this, the ontogenetic development of children does not involve innate capacities that are brought to the surface with time. Rather, the development involves the transformation of these innate capacities once they are linked with sociocultural mediational means (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995). With its emphasis on social interaction and sociocultural mediational means, sociocultural theory may be particularly enriching to the

field of SLA because the acquisition of a language is after all first and foremost a social activity acquired through social interaction and later expressed through the same means.

Indeed, Schinke-Llano (1993), although admitting that Vygotskian sociocultural theory cannot provide an explanation to all questions generating from the field of SLA, holds that it is relatively applicable to the field and has not been utilized as an explanatory framework to its fullest potential. She maintains that certain concepts in Vygotskian psycholinguistics are very relevant and compatible with current second language acquisition theory. For instance, Vygotsky's view of thought and language as being intertwined together in a developmental process starting at the age of two fits well with the bilingual education proponents' position which holds that if education in the native language is suddenly replaced by education in the second language, the child's cognitive development may be affected (Skutnab-Kangas and Toukama 1976, cited in Schinke-Llano 1993:122) Another Vygotskian concept outlined by Schinke-Llano in relation to the field of SLA has to do with the developmental framework Vygotsky adopts in explanation whereby the focus is on change rather than end results. This is certainly compatible with SLA research were there has currently been more of a focus on the processes related to the development of language acquisition rather than the end results. Finally, the Vygotskian emphasis on cognitive development and language acquisition as being social processes that result from social interaction and joint problem-solving processes has parallels with the current emphasis in SLA theory on viewing the learner as part of an interaction rather than an independent entity viewed in isolation (Schinke-Llano ibid).

Despite this need for further application of sociocultural theory to the field of SLA, Vygotskian theory has currently gained importance in the field. The following paper provides a review of some of the research which has already been done in the field emphasizing the relevance of sociocultural theory to the field of SLA. Albeit brief, this review is meant to provide the reader with a flavor of some of the research which has taken place in the field of SLA while providing an overview of sociocultural theory itself. The review is divided into 4 general areas which such research has focused on: studies which criticize SLA research framed in the message model of communication; studies

which reveal deficiencies in common instructional practices; studies which emphasize the role of private speech in 2^(nd) language learning; and studies which unveil discourse strategies for semiotic mediation. Each area will be discussed separately in a section on its own.

2. The message model of communication

According to Donato (1994), studies of L2 interaction have largely been framed in the message model of communication whereby data are sought in the form of negotiated interaction. There is thus the concern with identifying ways in which comprehensible input and comprehensible output are produced by learners. Identifying these discourse processes generally involves describing and categorizing moves exhibited by learners as they attempt to comprehend a message. Donato and Lantolf (1991) hold that this functionalist approach to language presents speech as a process of performing explicit functional categories such as greetings, requests, and so forth. As such, they maintain that speaking in this view is a post hoc linguistic activity that is based on an individual's linguistic knowledge about the forms of the language. Speech thus allows an individual to portray cognitive processes and knowledge of an activity and is not seen as a potential source of learning related to a task or activity. The reason why such a view of communication has seldom been questioned according to Donato and Lantolf (ibid.) may be attributed to its being so widespread in the field of SLA in particular and psycholinguistic research in general. Frawley and Lantolf (1985) refer to this as the traditional conduit model which, viewing communication as simple encoding and decoding of messages, holds that when speakers face difficulties with encoding messages, they choose from a number of communication strategies to help them.

From a sociocultural view point, such a view overlooks the psycholinguistic aspects of the process. Frawley and Lantolf (1991) claim that most traditional research on discourse is based on Platonic models which are characterized by misconceptions related to how the process of discourse actually occurs. They object to the fact that such models hold that discourse processing has its roots in a total knowledge base possessed by an individual prior to an experiment. This knowledge is then assumed to be

activated by the task involved in the experiment and is later used to process the input of the experimental task. For Frawley and Lantolf (1985), 'such models, in making data accountable to pre-articulated structures, describe not what humans actually do in discourse processing, but what they must do' (24-5). Lantolf (1993) similarly holds that meaning in communication is not based on the message model of communication with its conduit metaphor which views a defect in communication as mainly arising from a failure on the part of the receiver to decode a message from the sender who encodes it in a certain way. Rather, according to sociocultural theory, it is precisely this variance in message encoding and decoding that creates meaning. Lantolf (1993) attributes this to the fact that meaning in sociocultural theory is not transmitted but dialogically derived through interaction. According to Bruner (1986), the idea of education as the transmission of information from teacher to passive pupil is not appropriate. Rather, culture and education are essentially forums where teacher and pupil negotiate joint understanding through having the teacher lead the pupil through zones of proximal development.

Donato (1994) pinpoints the major deficiency with the message model of communication in terms of the study of L2 interaction as not placing enough emphasis on the social context. Rather, this theoretical orientation holds that the development of an interlanguage in SLA an abstract process arising from social interaction. The end result of this orientation, according to Donato (1994), is that there is little opportunity for collaboration in L2 interaction studies. Since the goals of the experimental task in such studies are defined separately, individuals in such studies interact together without the social elements associated with a typical interaction which would ordinarily occur in the real world. Tarone (1979) holds that although SLA researchers are aware of the variability of interlanguage, in that like a chameleon it is sensitive to context, this chameleon like nature of interlanguage is generally ignored when setting up and reporting research methodology. The implications of this are that the true systematic form of SL learners' interlanguage cannot be observed since this systematic form cannot be produced due to the presence of the researcher which causes subjects to pay attention to their speech. Lantolf and Khanji (1982) similarly outline the major

shortcoming of SLA research as its failure to take into account the systematic variation in interlanguage performance. SLA research design must take this interlanguage variability into account.

A discussion of the role of context brings forth an acknowledgement of the role which socio-cultural factors come to play in SLA. One such factor is attitude towards the 2nd language. Negative attitudes towards the 2nd language, for instance, may cause language learning to be more difficult. Tarone and Swain (1995) explain how issues of identity and group acceptance may act as social pressures which negatively impact the use of the 2nd language during informal interactions in cases when SL learners do not possess the socially accepted vernacular. Gardner (1985) outlines motivation as another socio-cultural factor affecting 2nd language learning. He proposes three components – effort, desire, and satisfaction– which must co-exist in order to have motivation in language learning. In his interaction hypothesis, Long (1990) explains how the use of the 2nd language in interaction facilitates language acquisition and proficiency. Finally, Cummins and Swain (1986) discuss the concept of linguistic interdependence which suggest that literacy in the native language aids in SLA since language skills developed in the native language can transfer to the 2nd language.

Donato and Lantolf (1991) maintain that the message model of communication creates a dichotomy between speech activity and cognition limiting the formation of a theory which integrates speaking and cognitive processes together as the Vygotskian paradigm does when it overcomes this dichotomy by holding that speaking helps in the formation of higher cognitive processes. As such, language for Donato and Lantolf (1991) is to be viewed as a semiotic tool used to carry out certain thinking functions. Yet another critical stance is taken by Brooks and Donato (1994) when they dismiss the encoding-decoding perspective on interaction as being limited in terms of analyzing interaction among foreign language learners by simply looking at ways in which comprehension of a message is achieved by decoding a message. To them, this dominant view results in studies of SL verbal interaction that perceive the language produced during an interaction as a series of numbers and figures to be analyzed statistically.

Based on these apparent deficiencies in the message model of communication, Donato and Lantolf (1991) propose two qualifications needed for the analysis of discourse during collaboration. First, analysis has to go beyond a look at how speakers send messages verbally to the speakers' actual engagement in metatalk or talk about the talk which is related to completing a certain task. Also, they propose that the actual negotiation process during the spoken discourse should not just include negotiation at the level of the word and the exchange of the message. Rather, all verbal forms such as affective markers and language structure are significant to a speaker's cognitive processes during discourse as a task is being completed. To them, negotiation during spoken discourse has less to do with message transmission and more to do with various aspects related to the task that is to be completed such as regulation methods, extent of involvement in a task, affective responses, and how speakers orient themselves to the task solving situation. As such, they recommend protocol analysis of speech during activity as being helpful in revealing the level of activity which a person has reached at a certain point. In 2nd language classrooms specifically, Donato and Lantolf (1991) claim that interactions during discourse have more to do with creating a common perspective on the task to be completed than with the exchange of message and word meaning. The vital area for investigation should thus relate to how speaking engages individuals in controlling the object of the activity and others in order to achieve self-regulation or control over the self.

Frawley and Lantolf (1985) present a similar case by holding that Vygotskian sociocultural theory offers a dynamic model of discourse which does away with the tradition that discriminates between correct and incorrect forms of the language produced. Instead, according to this model, all forms of discourse have to be taken into account being viewed as markers of the way speakers relate to a task rather than simply being considered markers or indicators of a speaker's language ability or linguistic competence. Based on this, Frawley and Lantolf (1985) hold that all verbal forms such as affective markers, hesitation phenomena, and language structure are revelatory in the sense that they indicate a speaker's cognitive stage during the completion of a task. They are also considered relevant in the sense that all verbal

forms uttered by speakers are related to the process of completing a task or solving a particular problem.

3. Deficiencies in common instructional practices

According to Donato and Adair (1992), the application of the Vygotskian principle of the ZPD to the field of SLA and the realization of the role brought about by the social context has shed light on some underlying deficiencies in instructional practices which may go unnoticed. In one study for instance, Donato and Adair (1992) showed that rhetorical questions on the part of the teacher limit interaction during instruction as they do not require an answer. They thus do not allow the learner to externalize through speech thought processes and test hypotheses. Along similar lines, Douglas Barnes (1976, in Edwards and Mercer 1987:29), after researching communication in the classroom, found that it is not only the teacher which provides a learning environment for children.   Rather, there is a dialectical relationship between teacher and pupils which often times allows children to realize differences between their implicit beliefs and those taught by the teacher through dialogue. Children are thus guided through new zones of proximal development through discourse. In the search for classroom talk that incorporates such characteristics, Barnes (1976) found that much of classroom time is spent as if in a competition where the teacher functions as a question master:

> Much teaching leaves the pupils dependent not on publicly established systems of knowledge (if such exist) but on quite trivial preconceptions set up arbitrarily either on the spur of the moment, or when the teacher planned the lesson during the previous evening. This reduces the part played by the pupils to a kind of guesswork in which they try to home in upon the teacher's signal about what kind of answer is acceptable (ibid.)

Ohta (1995) maintains that the classroom context in which SLA occurs differs greatly form the context in which children acquire their L1. It usually occurs through the IRF or iniation, response, and follow-up activity, which differs greatly from conversation that occurs in a natural setting. Ohta (1995) also points out that the traditional classroom whereby the teacher takes the primary role in directing students may limit the opportunities for language learners to practice using their SL in circumstances that may

occur outside the classroom such as in collaboration with others, negotiation of roles, or simply unstructured conversation. As such, Ohta (1995) maintains that opportunities need to be provided for language learners to use their L2 freely and creatively since strict control of language use may actually hinder the language acquisition process.

Foley (1991) adopts a Vygotskian view when questioning the formal syllabus approach as harboring a classroom in which object-regulation through excessive drills and other-regulation by the teacher are dominant. Since teachers who follow this approach focus on errors in the learner's speech and writing, this limits opportunities for self-regulation. Foley (1991) thus holds that the formal syllabus approach presents a classroom that is dominated by object- and other-regulation. Rather than presenting language as an activity which aims at achieving self-regulation, the process used for acquiring a second language differs greatly from that a child goes through when acquiring a first language. For Foley (1991), such instructional strategies provide little reference for the individual learner but are rather based on a number of functions generated through hypothesizing about possible learner needs. Relating this to writing, Roy (1989) holds that since social speech is internalized to produce thought, it follows that writing is internalized speech but in externalized form. From this standpoint, a high level of control and guidance by teacher in writing is not helpful. Rather, the writing process has to be viewed as a problem solving process in the ZPD. Since writing in a second language helps in the continual development of higher mental processes, Roy (1989) maintains that there should not be over control of the L2 students' writing such as removing errors in which solutions to problems may be found and reverting to drills and formulas to be followed.

A number of studies have pointed out the need to place more emphasis on the role of social factors in relation to instruction within the ZPD. Chandler (1992) adopts a socio-cultural perspective when examining the relationship of student learning to the planned curriculum. She views the classroom as a unique culture where norms, relationships, and the roles of teacher and pupils are socially constructed over time. With the curriculum thus being constructed through a social interactive process in which students play an active role, the delivered or

enacted curricula do not always abide with the planned curricula. As such, Chandler (1992) maintains that planning the curriculum with the goal of learning is insufficient without consideration of learning opportunities and the avoidance of constraints on learning.

Bloome (1986) holds that the lack of acknowledgment of social elements inherent in literacy has led to deficiencies in the use of reading and writing activities in the classroom community. For instance, mock participation is a process in which students carry out behavior that makes it seem as if they are participating in a discussion when in reality, they are not. Classroom literacy thus no longer presents an instructional method used to expand knowledge but simply a series of events which they are forced to go through. Perhaps more serious is procedural display whereby both the teacher and students interact together with behavior that is appropriate for a discussion without actually getting to the academic bulk of a lesson or becoming cognizant of the value of interaction during a discussion. The teacher and students thus work together repairing any breakdowns that occur in the lesson in order to produce the cultural ritual of the typical classroom lesson. Bloome (1986) goes on to point that reading and writing in the classroom community should not be practiced for their own sake by giving out handouts, books or worksheets for instance, that accomplish little besides being part of a lesson. Instead, he stresses the use of reading and writing to accomplish other personal or community based goals and activities just as would normally be the case in a work or home setting. Along similar lines, Adair-Hauck and Donato (1994) maintain that the traditional instructional methodology of grammar simply arranges instructional events in degree of complexity. This leads to rote learning which involves little social interaction between teacher and learner. They contrast this with grammar instruction within the zone of proximal development, the ZPD, which calls for a rearrangement of activities to involve the learner in the lesson from the start.

In one study, Brooks (1992) investigated the process of acquiring communicative competence defined by Hymes (1972, cited in Brooks 1992:219) as the way in which a language learner adopts knowledge of a language and is able to use a language through social interaction with others from the same social group.

The investigation demonstrated that developing communicative competence in the target language through social interaction is constrained by certain features within the formal academic setting. For instance, learning only the linguistic forms of a language such as grammar, syntax and lexicon is not enough for promoting social use of the language. Also, when the foreign language instructor assumes a relatively large portion of conversation management, this hinders students learning to make those decisions in a normal social setting. In the study, for example, the teacher preselected discussion topics specifying that those chosen were of primary importance as well as acted as the primary agent responsible for initiating and ending conversations. For Brooks (1992), even though such procedures support student participation in discussions, save time, and maintain approval on the part of students; these two methods of formal instruction actually limited the potential of what students may learn by constraining the students' role of independent acting and decision making the target language.

In discussing deficiencies in common educational practices, Edwards and Mercer (1987) provide an in depth discussion of how failures in the achievement of shared understandings between teachers and students are not just related to areas of curriculum content. Rather, they identify as more profound misunderstandings in what may be referred to as educational ground-rules which they define as (Edwards and Mercer 1981, cited in Edwards and Mercer 1987:47) implicit rules of educational talk and interpretation related to the context of the classroom. Researchers engaged in analyzing communication in the classroom often pay little attention to such misunderstandings being more concerned with searching for regularities and particular features of an interaction. According to Edwards and Mercer (1987), this failure in establishing mutual understanding of discourse in relation to such implicit rules may be labeled as slow or unintelligent. Further, a danger lies in what may on the surface appear to be an engagement in classroom discourse, would only be participation in a superficial sense. Although engaged in classroom discourse, teacher and pupils would not, in such cases, be achieving a shared understanding or ground-rule. Edwards and Mercer (1987)   hold that this

deficiency is actually related to the prolonged problem in education of handing over control from teacher to students.

4. The role of private speech in 2nd language learning

Studies done in relation to speech and language learning have specifically investigated the role of private speech in 2nd language acquisition. According to Vygotskian sociocultural theory, speech serves two functions. The primary function of speech is communicative and interpersonal related to mediating relationships with others. The secondary function of speech is more intrapersonal having to do with mediating the relationship with the self. Social speech evolves into egocentric or private speech hence reflecting this secondary function. While initially resembling social speech in structure and form, private speech eventually starts resembling social speech less with time turning into inner speech or verbal thought (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995).

A number of studies in this area have focused on inner speech as an externalization of cognitive processes. In one of the initial studies investigating private speech in 2nd language acquisition, Frawley and Lantolf (1985) compared the discourse of two ESL groups which included adult native speakers and native child speakers. It was shown that what may at first appear as linguistic incompetence as reflected by such peculiarities as the externalization of macrostructure, the use of extra-textual information, tense aspect functions in discourse, exophoric pronominalization, and the use of affective markers are in truth functional because they represent attempts at gaining self-regulation by reverting to childlike SL discourse. They thus function as an externalization of metacognitive functions whereby the Vygotskian principle of continuous access allows individuals, when faced with difficult tasks, to revert to earlier knowing strategies as a means of achieving self-regulation and gaining control over mental functions. Based on this, the common stance taken towards errors in SL production needs reassessment. Generally speaking, errors have been viewed as representing linguistic incompetence. The principle of continuous access, however, sheds new light on understanding the difficulty associated with the production and often disorderly problematic structure of discourse in a 2nd language in that errors represent a producer's attempt at gaining control and self-regulation by

reverting to previous knowing strategies involving other- or object-regulation. Errors may actually formulate useful strategies that are functional for the speaker in gaining control and achieving self-regulation through language (Frawley & Lantolf 1985).

A few studies have highlighted the fact that speaking, especially in the form of private speech, actually helps mediate cognitive activity. Appel and Lantolf (1994) demonstrated that when L1 and L2 speakers were asked to orally recall narrative and expository English texts, speech, especially that in the form of private speech, served to mediate cognitive activity of reading and orally recalling a narrative and expository text. It was found that speech not only aided in recalling the texts but also served as a process through which the speakers comprehend the text. Appel and Lantolf (1994) concluded that meaning is constructed from a text after reading through activities considered social in nature such as conversing with others about the text or conversing with oneself in the form of private speech. Along similar lines, Brooks and Donato (1994) showed that speaking during a two-way problem solving communicative task may not necessarily be communicative in intent, hence the inappropriateness of the encoding-decoding perspective for the analysis of such interactions. Instead, speech during such communicative tasks may represent attempts at mediating the speakers' control over the language, the task, other participants, and finally the self. Although discouraged in L2 classrooms because it usually occurs in L1, metatalk, as a form of object-regulation, actually promotes discourse and is essentially one form of metacognition.

Yet another study on the role of speech in mediating cognitive activity was conducted by Lantolf and Ahmed (1989) in their investigation of variability in the linguistic performance of an Arabic speaker of English as a 2nd language across three different activities. They concluded that interlanguage variation across activities is not a developmental process whereby new modes of speaking replace earlier ones. Rather, both speaking modes may occur together. This relates to Vygotskian sociocultural theory where 'different genetic forms coexist in thinking, just as different rock formation coexist in the earth's crust. Such a structure is not an exception, but rather a rule of behavior…developmentally late forms coexist in behavior with

younger formations' (Vygotsky 1986:140). More specifically, Lantolf and Ahmed (1989) found that linguistic performance and variations associated with it are actually a reflection of the intersubjectivity or the shared definition of the situation which is not there at the outset of a dialogue but which has to be negotiated between the interlocutors (Wertsch 1985).

Although studies comparing native and 2nd language speakers' discourse mostly assume a difference, studies based on a sociocultural framework prove that there is actually little difference between the two. In fact, there is a continuous relationship between 2nd language speakers, native adult speakers and native child speakers of a language. This is because, in the face of linguistically challenging tasks, native adult speakers revert to child-like cognitive strategies with the ensuing result that their discourse would have points of similarity with that of native children and 2nd language learners. The claim may thus be made that an individual never remains an adult or reaches adulthood because he or she must always cater cognitive functions to the task at hand (Frawley & Lantolf 1985). Ushakova (1994) similarly contends that inner speech, developed by children in their native language, forms the basis of all future language learning. In a study which investigates the relation between private speech and culture, Roy (1989) finds that the Vygotskian concept of mediation relates to the function of language which places things in categories of culture. He finds parallels between this and the strong version of the Whorf hypothesis which maintains that language determines culture in the sense that a child learns about culture through the language of people during interaction. Roy (1989) adds to the Whorf hypothesis the Vygotskian emphasis on the interrelation between language and culture.

5. Discourse strategies for semiotic mediation

While other disciplines have derived direct educational implications from sociocultural theory, the field of SLA has not given sufficient attention to Vygotskian sociocultural theory. In general, there has been little research done regarding actual discursive communicative strategies which a teacher employs in the zone of proximal development, the ZPD, while teaching a foreign language. There is definitely a need to identify semiotic

strategies and discourse methods used to transfer responsibility form the teacher as expert to the learner as novice (Adair-Hauck and Donato 1994). In one such study concerned with discourse strategies for semiotic mediation, Newman, Griffin and Cole (1989) demonstrated through a lesson on division that the construction of cognitive knowledge and the transmission of procedural skills cannot simply be reduced to direct instruction. Rather, it takes place through interactions in the ZPD through processes such as appropriation and interpsychological construction. Newman et al. (1989) emphasize the inseparability of social cognitive processes by illustrating that certain interpsychological processes which arise from social interaction play a role in effecting cognitive change. Further, differences in interactive processes among pupils are a reflection of differences in social context. Hence, changes in cognition often thought of as being developmental are actually also constructed socially. From this, Newman et al. (1989) conclude that different understandings or multiple realities between those involved in an interaction do not necessitate miscommunication. Rather, they formulate a necessary component of any social interaction.

In his study of three year-long observations of a Japanese FLES program, Takahashi (1998) analyzed the learners' development of interaction from a Vygotskian perspective. Analysis revealed that the guidance provided for the learners in the ZPD helped them outperform their current level of linguistic skills. As the development of the learners' language improved, they were more capable of providing each other with scaffolded help which in turn made them more active in classroom participation. Takahashi (1998) maintains that the evidence that students had internalized the form of aid provided to them by the teacher was reflected through the way they provided mutual assistance. This seemed to be a clear indication that students in a classroom learn not only the taught subject but also the culture of the classroom which according to Brooks (1993; qtd. in Takahashi 1998:402) 'becomes co-constructed and continuously defined and modified during the activities that take place as part of daily life within the foreign language classroom'. As such, Takahashi (1998) recommends that the teacher should create a classroom environment that allows for social interaction among learners as well as provide mutual guidance in the ZPD.

Along similar lines, Lantolf (1993) advocates dialogic interaction in the ZPD in place of authoritative discourse which involves the learners' recitation of the language of others as well as such pedagogical features as the imposition of a uniform curriculum and the issuing of standardized testing and restricting syllabus, may be dismissed as being highly monologic in nature. For Lantolf (1993), language learning is accelerated when the curriculum is negotiated and dialogically constructed rather than simply being imposed by authorities. Only through such negotiated interaction can the voice of the linguistic self be constructed as it is based on the utterances one gets from the voice of others and their choice of words. The construction of voice or the linguistically constituted self is quite important because it allows for symbolic or linguistically constituted freedom. Such utterances, which formulate the highest level of freedom, are embodied in dialogue whereby an individual can truly achieve symbolic freedom and override grammatical constraints of a language through dialogue (Lantolf 1993).

In his study of L2 learners, Donato (1994) demonstrated that expertise is not always needed for the construction of a ZPD. In the study, French L2 learners were through collaboration, able to mediate each other providing scaffolded help for one another that is very similar in nature to the scaffolding that occurs in a usual expert-novice relationship. Gaining insight into the development of linguistic competence requires an observation of how learners may jointly construct co-knowledge during interaction. Studies done along this mode help bring to light the effect which interaction in joint tasks has on linguistic development According to Donato (1994), the current theoretical orientation which advocates collaboration and joint group activity in second language classrooms should be broadened not only to include basic opportunities for interaction in the classroom, but also to include collective means for the development of a second language. From the perspective of SLA research, Donato (1994) concludes from the study that simply focusing on conversational adjustments of language learners conceals the true value of collaborative dialogue in bringing about linguistic change and development.

A number of SL studies have placed particular emphasis on the role of social factors in semiotic mediation in within the ZPD.

For instance, Ohta (1995) investigated learner-learner collaborative interaction between two students differing in levels of language proficiency. Analysis revealed that cooperative learning opportunities provide a positive environment for L2 acquisition in the zone of proximal development which is not as evident in traditional teacher-fronted classroom activities. For one thing, peer interaction allows learners to alternate roles as expert and novice depending on their individual contributions to the interaction. The fluidity in roles and the ensuing benefits derived form each role occurs even though the teacher may, prior to the task, set up and control the interaction by defining the roles of expert and novice for the learners. Thus, as cooperative work commences, the learners ultimately have to reconstruct their roles through collaboration. Abiding by this, the role of the teacher changes from exerting full control to simply offering support to learner pairs in need of it. In addition to providing the benefit of fluidity in roles, peer collaboration allows learners to apply any competence acquired through interaction to their own use of the language (Ohta 1995).

One line of research into instructional strategies that promote language learning in the ZPD has dealt with the creation of intersubjectivity. For instance, DiCamilla and Anton (1997) investigated how repetition of both L1 and L2 utterances during collaborative interaction of L2 learners engaged in an L2 writing task serves as a form of semiotic mediation. Viewed from the framework of Vygotskian theory, they showed that repetition not only serves the sociocognitive function of constructing and distributing scaffolded help during an activity, but more importantly establishes and maintains intersubjectivity or a shared perspective of the task at hand. This formulates a necessary element for successful collaboration within the ZPD (DiCamilla and Anton 1997).

For Edwards and Mercer (1987), 'The process of education, insofar as it succeeds, is largely the establishment of these shared mental 'contexts', joint understandings between teacher and children, which enable them to engage together in a educational discourse' (69). Context for Edwards and Mercer (1987) is neither linguistic nor non-linguistic. It is rather a mental characteristic of the shared understandings created between people communicating. In turn, context contributes to the development of

continuity whereby contexts of shared understanding grow over time. In recorded lessons, Edwards and Mercer (1987) found that the continuity of shared knowledge was made the most explicit at the start of a lesson whereby links to what had been taught previously were made by the teacher. Appeals to continuities of shared knowledge were also made at points where there seemed to be disagreements or incongruities between participants' understandings. At such points, it was the adult who most often made these appeals by directly discussing mental processes involved or discussing the conversation itself. As such, Edwards and Mercer (1987) maintain that the underlying belief is that education itself is about the development of a shared understanding and common perspective which involves the handover of competence to children.

Bruner (1996) defines intersubjectivity as the process through which people come to know what others are thinking of and how they adjust to this. He claims that western pedagogy does not pay enough attention to the role of intersubjectivity in transmitting culture. In that respect, the ZPD which presents the capability to go beyond native endowment has vital educational implications for Bruner (1996); it shows that education has as one of its primary functions transmitting to individuals the tools which their culture has developed for them to reach beyond their native endowment. Even constraints set forth by language can be reduced to linguistic awareness or consciousness. Indeed, Bruner (1996) admits that:

> Since the limits of our inherent mental predispositions can be transcended by having recourse to more powerful symbolic systems, one function of education is to equip human beings with the needed symbolic systems for doing so. And if the limits imposed by the languages we use are expanded by increasing our 'linguistic awareness', then another function of pedagogy is to cultivate such awareness' (19).

For Bruner (1996), metacognition is a primary aspect of any educational system. He holds that the learning of skills and knowledge is not enough. Rather, according to Bruner (1996), the child should also be presented with a theory of mind or mental functioning in order to help the child become as much aware of thinking and learning processes as the material being studied.

6. Conclusion

When applied to the field of SLA, sociocutural theory in general appears to highlight a couple of concepts in relation to second language acquisition. For one thing, it emphasizes the role played by conscious linguistic processes in SL development. Consciousness does indeed play a vital role in second language acquisition (Adair-Hauck & Donato 1994). Accompanying this emphasis on consciousness is a focus on the role played by the social context in the field of SLA. (Donato1994). More specifically, the application of sociocultural theory to SLA emphasizes the need to examine how consciousness results jointly from social interaction between teacher and pupils in formal instruction (Donato & Adair 1992). Takahashi (1998) reiterates this by holding that the emphasis on social interaction in SLA brings with it a realization that learning has to be studied from the time of receiving input till the time of producing output. From a pedagogic standpoint, the recognition of social processes involved in reading and writing whereby the individual plays an active role in the construction of meaning stands in sharp juxtaposition to the monolithic view of literacy whereby reading and writing are taught as a series of exercise meant to develop cognition based on the traditional view that reading and writing occur in the mind of an individual (Bloome 1986).

This review has briefly touched up on some of the research that has currently been done with regard to the application of sociocultural theory to the field of SLA thus giving the reader a bit of flavor of what the increased interest in the theory has contributed to the field. The fact remains, however, that only the surface has been scratched. There awaits the field of SLA a plethora of what may perhaps formulate insightful findings upon the application of sociocultural theory to the field.

References

Adair-Hauck, B. and Richard Donato. (1994). 'Foreign language explanation within the zone of proximal development'. *The Canadian Modern Language Review,* 50/3:532-57.

Appel, G. and James P. Lantolf (1994). 'Speaking as mediation: a study of L1 and L2 text recall tasks'. *Modern Language Journal*, 78:437-52.

Barnes, D. (1976). *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bloome, D. (1986). 'Building literacy and the classroom community'. *Theory into Practice*, 25:71-6.

Brooks, F. (1992). 'Communicative competence and the conversation course: a social interaction perspective'. *Linguistics and Education*, 4:219-246.

_____. (1993) 'Some problems and caveats in communicative discourse: toward a conceptualization of the foreign language classroom'. *Foreign Language Annals,* 26:233-42.

Brooks, F. and R. Donato. (1994). 'Vygotskian approaches to understanding foreign language learner discourse during communicative tasks'. *Hispania,* 77:262-74.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. London: Harvard UP.

_____. (1996) *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP.

Chandler, S. (1992). 'Learning for what purpose? Questions when viewing classroom learning from a sociocultural curriculum perspective'. In Hermine H. Marshall (ed.) *Redefining Student Learning*, 33-58. Westport CT: Greenwood.

Cummins, J. and M. Swain. (1986). *Bilingualism in Education: Aspects of Theory, Research, and Practice.* London: Longman.

DiCamilla, F. and M. Anton. (1997). 'Repetition in the collaborative discourse of L2 learners: a Vygotskian perspective'. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 53/4:609-33.

Donato, R. (1994). 'Collective scaffolding in second language learning'. In James P. Lantolf and Gabriela Appel (eds.) *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research,* 31-56 Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Donato, R. and B. Adair. (1992). 'Discourse perspectives on formal instruction'. *Language Awareness*, 1/2: 73-87.

Donato, R. and J. Lantolf. (1991). 'Communication and social interaction: conduit or cognitive activity?' Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, March, 1991, Seattle, WA.

Edwards, D. and N. Mercer. (1987). *Common Knowledge: The Development of Understanding in the Classroom*. Methuen, London.

Foley, J. (1991). 'A psycholinguistic framework for task-based approaches to language teaching'. *Applied Linguistics*, 12/1: 62-75.

Frawley, W. and J. Lantolf. (1985). 'Second language discourse: a Vygotskian perspective'. *Applied Linguistics*, 6/1:19-44.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation.* London: Edward Arnold.

Hymes, D. (1972). 'On communicative competence'. In J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics*, 269-93. London: Penguin Books.

Lantolf, J. P. (1993). 'Sociocultural theory and the second-language classroom: the lesson of strategic interaction'. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, 220-33. Georgetown DC: Georgetown UP.

Lantolf J. and R. Khanji. (1982). 'Non-Linguistic parameters of Interlanguage performance: expanding the research paradigm', *the Ninth LACUS FORUM*, 457-73. John Morreal (ed.). Chapel Hill NC: Hornbeam Press.

Lantolf, J. P. and M. K. Ahmed. (1989). 'Psycholinguistic perspectives on interlanguage variation: A Vygotskian analysis'. In Gass, S., Madden, C., Preston, D. and Selinker, L. (eds.), *Variation in Second Language Acquisition I.: Discourse and Pragmatics. Multilingual Matters*, Clevedon, England.

Lantolf, J. P. and A. Pavlenko. (1995). 'Sociocultural theory and second language acquisition'. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol.15, p.108-24.

Long, M. (1990). 'The lease a second language acquisition theory needs to explain'. *TESOL QUARTERLY,* 24:649-66.

Newman, D., P. Griffin, P. and M. Cole. (1989). *The Construction Zone: Working for Cognitive Change in School*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Ohta, A. S. (1995). 'Applying sociocultural theory to an analysis of learner discourse: learner-learner collaborative interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development'. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6,/2:93-121.

Roy, A. M. (1989). 'Developing second language literacy: a Vygotskian perspective'. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 8/1:91-8.

Schinke-Llano, L. (1993), 'On the value of a Vygotskian framework for SLA theory and research'. *Language Learning*, 43/1:121-9.

Skutnab-Kangas, T. and P. Toukomaa. (1976). *Teaching migrant children's mother tongue and learning the language of the host country in the context of the socio-cultural situation of the migrant family*. Helsinki: The Finnish National Commission for UNESCO.

Takahashi, E. (1998). 'Language development in social interaction: a longitudinal study of Japanese FLES program from a

Vygotskian approach'. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31/3:392-406.

Tarone, E. (1979). 'Interlanguage as chameleon'. *Language Learning Journal*, 29:181-91.

Tarone, E. and M. Swain. (1995). 'A sociolinguistic perspective on second language use in immersion classrooms'. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79/2:166-78.

Ushakova, T. N. (1994). 'Inner speech and second language acquistion: an experimental-theoretical approach'. In J. P. Lantolf and G. Appel (eds.) *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP.

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

Wertsch, J. (1985). *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind.* Cambridge MA: Harvard UP.

_____. (1998) *Mind as Action*, Oxford: Oxford UP.