SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Annotation: *English language teaching (ELT) is a relatively young field. In its earlier years, pedagogical models were taken from foreign language teaching, and based on views of language taken from structural linguistics. Thus to come to speak a language entailed learning its vocabulary, structures and forms, and practicing these in scripted ways. Other chapters in this volume speak to changing views of language pedagogy, as the field has moved to communicative approaches, and those that teach language through content. A sociocultural approach does not displace these, and does not, in fact, proscribe particular texts or activities for language learning and teaching.*

Key words: sociocultural approach, sociocultural view of language, interlocutors, scaffolded social negotiations, ways of communication, culturally and linguistically, culturally bound concept.

Introduction. A sociocultural approach, as its name implies, situates language use in its social and cultural contexts. Language, as a communicative tool, is always used by and between people for the purpose of making meaning. A language – English for our purposes here – is not one monolithic entity, but a variety of genres, registers, dialects and so forth that are used in specific spaces for specific purposes. While it is clear that different people use different forms of English, say African-American vernacular English (in the case of African Americans), or Singlish (in the case of Singaporeans), even that distinction is too uniform. Native-like fluency in a language requires that people have the ability to switch between different forms in different contexts for different purposes, fluently and effortlessly. Here is an example. Imagine that there has recently been a rash of gang-related violence in a neighborhood very close to yours. You have a discussion about this with your best friend. Shortly afterwards, your grandmother phones. She is concerned because she has read about the gang violence, and wants to discuss it with you. If you take a minute to imagine those actual conversations, you will see that, although the general topic is the same, not only might the content of what you say be different, but the actual words and structures you use will likely be different too, as may intonation, pitch, and other aspects of language use. Differences may be attributed to generational differences, formality/informality, and so on, but are rooted in the relationships we have with those we are communicating with, what we are speaking

about (imagine if you were instead speaking about the break-up of your latest relationship, or a professional accomplishment), the context in which the communication takes place, and what it is we wish to accomplish. A sociocultural view of language posits that language use is about situated meaning-making, and meanings constructed in communication are not just based on language. Many other things convey meaning that go hand in hand with the language we use. Things such as gestures and facial expressions carry meaning. (Imagine someone saying, 'I especially liked the history lecture,' followed by a wink. The wink changes the meaning entirely.) But equally important are all of the other things that send messages about who people are (identities they are enacting) and wish to be seen as, such as their dress, or body language, or the tools and props that they use. These things work together with language, as people in real time in situated communications gauge who their interlocutors are, what their intentions are, and what they are trying to say even as they author their own words and actions, in the interplay of constructing meanings together. Being 'fluent' in a language means more than knowing vocabulary and structure; it means knowing which varieties of language to use, when, where, and to what purpose in local situated contexts.

Theory and Method. A sociocultural view of classrooms Just as language use must be seen as a situated phenomenon, so must learning and teaching in classrooms. There are two key aspects to understanding how sociocultural theories might guide us to structure classrooms in ways that adequately support English learners. Sociocultural theories draw on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), who posits that learning occurs through social interactions, as learners make meaning through the negotiation of new concepts (and language). His work, focused on children's learning, argues that learning occurs in a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), where children, through scaffolded interactions with more capable peers and adults, can move to the next stage of development (beyond their current stage). Learning, then, may be seen as a system of apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). The requisite skills, knowledge and language for school success are distributed throughout the classroom environment, located in teachers, staff, students, texts, and other resources. Students come to understandings of school-based practices, concepts and language through scaffolded social negotiations and interactions with others, which are mediated by and through texts and materials. Understandings and knowledge are first external, as they are negotiated with others, then internalized as they are appropriated to become the child's own. This has clear implications for teachers.

Research: Commonly, teachers assume that their job is to assist students to assimilate to the practices of school. They feel that they must help students to adjust, and to engage with schooling, learning and living as mainstream students and families do. They operate from a deficit perspective; that is, these students come without the language, knowledge, resources and support that other children have, and teachers see

their role as providing what the students need to catch up to others. Sociocultural theories, however, tell us that children do in fact come replete with knowledge, language skills, and rich family and community resources. They are simply different from what school people know to look for and recognize. Thus students receive the message that who they are and what they know does not count in this new environment. In order for all students to learn, schools must value, validate and represent all languages and cultures of those in the school community. This is easy to do on a surface level, through typical multicultural events such as potlucks, acknowledging cultural holidays and celebrations, and displaying ethnic/ cultural music, dances, costumes. However, while this is better than nothing, it fails to recognize, at a deeper level, what it means to be a member of a cultural and linguistic community. It fails to demand that teachers connect as a learner with the families and communities that their students come from, to learn about beliefs, world-views, and ways of being in and seeing the world that are different from their own, and then find ways to draw on and incorporate what they learn in their teaching (Gonzalez et al., 2005). It also fails to recognize the barriers that cultural and linguistic diversity create, both socially and academically. It fails to connect students to learning, it fails to connect students to each other as co-equals, and it fails to connect families with the academic practices of school. While newcomers certainly must learn the language and practices of schooling, educators also must change long-held beliefs and traditions regarding educational practices. In order to demonstrate this, let me introduce two students who have recently immigrated. They are fictitious, although based on composite characteristics of real students. We will then identify some prototypical school events and activities, and think about how they affect these students and their families.

Conclusion: As we have seen in the examples above, virtually all aspects of schooling entail cultural models of language use, learning and teaching, and activities designed to be developmentally appropriate that will not be equally familiar nor equally accessible to all students. This is not just because students are English learners, but because they come situated in particular histories, experiences, and lived realities, that carry with them ways of thinking, knowing, perceiving and acting. While students certainly must adjust to their new environment, and come to see themselves as active and equal participants in it, it is unreasonable to expect them to do so in an environment that is set up to create barriers for them, instead of offering appropriate support. It is the educators' responsibility to unpack the activities of classrooms and schools, and change current practices to be more inclusive of and responsive to diverse learners. In order to do this, educators should aim to do the following:

• Vary participation patterns for lessons such that students engage with others in activities that call for active communication and negotiation of meanings. • Ensure that lessons and activities are designed to leverage the knowledge and experiences that students bring. • Ensure that all activities in the classroom and larger school

environment are linguistically and culturally responsive. • Work with students to make transparent how language works (various forms for varied purposes). • Offer students appropriate language support to engage in learning using academic language, and to engage in school-based performances. • Create clear channels of communication with parents. • Connect families to the academic practices of school. • Ensure that all students have sufficient resources to carry out learning activities.

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