An Exploration of the Impact of Sociocultural Context on Language Learning towards EFL Learners: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: *Recent years have witnessed the abundant research on socio-cultural theory (SCT) in area of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning (SLL). The pedagogical practice based on SCT also brings considerable discussions and ongoing innovations. The current study, with theoretical basis of SCT, aims to investigate how sociocultural context facilitates EFL learners and how such factor impacts on their way of thinking and language development. Data was collected by interviews from three Chinese EFL learners with background of studying and working in an English-speaking country. The findings suggest that EFL learners are given the opportunities to actively use language when immersed in target language environment. Moreover, the school and workplace settings do provide a platform where EFL learners have access to social interactions and cultural practices, which also unconsciously influences their thinking patterns and language development.*

Keywords: Socio-cultural theory, Language learning and use, EFL learners, Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Language learning and use are influenced by multi-faceted factors. Sociocultural theory is one of prevailing topics in fields of SLA (second language acquisition) and SLL (second language learning). There are numerous studies targeted for this topic, which also strikes a chord as well as provides valuable resources for researchers. To deepen the understanding of this domain, it would be an objective and effective way to conduct interviews with three EFL (English as foreign language) learners to explore which aspect of SLA theories are consistent with process of L2 learning. This study will apply sociocultural theory (SCT) to explore how sociocultural context impacts on ESL learners and how it facilitates L2 learning by conducting a case study, making a comparison of similarities and differences among three Chinese EFL learners and giving pedagogical insights of L2 learning and acquisition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Development of Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

The socio-cultural theory (SCT) is originally proposed by Vygotsky (1978), which viewed language as a cultural tool as it can be used to exchange information and experience among people. Meanwhile, he stated that new knowledge of language is acquired when learners gain support (scaffolding) from others (i.e. peers and mentors), which occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In general, Vygotsky pointed out that ZPD refers to the space between what learners are capable of doing with assistance of instructors or peers and what they achieve without external guidance. Specifically, novices are able to perform tasks with "guided interactions", at the same time, they develop skills in ZPD as they are in transition from guided to independent action (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). One of the highlights of ZPD is about how learners co-construct knowledge when they interact with people. If possible, by using such idea in authentic classroom

settings, interactional models between mentors-learners and peers-learners will provide guided instruction and knowledge (Subban, 2006), which also offers opportunities for language use. In the meantime, during the process of interaction, it helps learners to co-construct their linguistic knowledge, which is described as collaborative dialogue (Swain 2000). Therefore, Swain claimed that language learning and use can proceed simultaneously, which could correspond to the synchronous occurrence of cognitive activity and social activity. Furthermore, speaking and thinking are interacted in a sociocultural context (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), which means that people may take control of their mental process as they engage in social interactions. However, some scholars held the opposite view that sociocultural changes the way of people's thinking.

From the sociocultural perspective, individual language development is proportional to sociocultural engagement because all social activities are organized in historical and cultural ways (Johnson, 2009). Since social interactions are closely related to culture practices, Johnson agreed that language is a medium which bridges information exchange and cultural understanding. In this sense, language learning can be facilitated by cultural exchange. Similar with such viewpoint, some researchers believe that language can be regarded as a socializing tool. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) deemed that "the process of language acquisition and the process of socialization are integrated." (p.163-191) That is because when people are fitting into society, they are also acquiring language at the same time. Through observation and analysis of children's behaviors, Schieffelin and his partner made a conclusion that being exposed to daily verbal exchanges enable children to gain socio-cultural knowledge. Besides, being socialized by using language to make interactions can also help learners to have a better understanding of language and culture.

By extending various studies of sociocultural theory and language learning, we have a clear picture about their relationship, which also paves a pathway to explore the issue about how sociocultural context influences L2 learning based

on the detailed analysis of verbal interviews from EFL learners. In addition, a comparison analysis between similarities and differences among EFL learners is needed for further insights and research.

2.2 Empirical Studies and Potential Gaps

To date, there has been a variety of studies center on language learning and acquisition from the socio-cultural perspective.

Based on the framework of SCT, Simeon (2015) explored how EFL learners' writing strategies by observation, field notes and group interactions. The research finding suggested that participants would employ five types of strategies, including brainstorm, use of L1, peer scaffolding, background knowledge and humor. Besides, this study noted that beginners would convey their needs and wants to experienced peers in learning process, which explained that writing process could be bi-directional among them.

With socio-cultural activity theory, Niu, Lu and You (2018) investigated Chinese EFL learners' oral language learning, seeking to explore social resources (i.e. in and out of class) that affect oral learning. In their research, data were collected from semi-structure and guided journals from four English-major students. What they discovered was that four types of resources (i.e. artifacts, rules, community and roles) will impact participants' oral performance. Meanwhile, they also aligned with the idea that oral language development is more than cognitive process, but it is a social process where learners have interactions with social resources (Engeström, 1999).

Under the setting of English as medium instruction (EMI), Yang et al. (2025) examined that self-regulated learning strategies were employed by EFL learners in a socio-cultural view. This study was conducted by questionnaire and learning journals, finding that participants actively utilized meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies to internalize external mediating resources (e.g. peer assistance and teacher instruction), yet they rarely used social and affective strategies to foster self-regulation ability. In addition, they also emphasized that interactive community learning could facilitate learning progress in EMI setting.

Since the previous research highlights multiple areas of language learning, the influence of sociocultural context in language learning, especially for EFL learners, are still doubtful and debatable. Hence, the present study is aimed to explore how socio-cultural context impacts on Chinese EFL learners and how social interactions affects their thinking patterns and language development, which attempts to fill the potential gap.

3. Research Design

Based on research status discussed above, this study will conduct a case study from 3 EFL learners through interviews and relevant analysis will be elaborated.

3.1 Research Questions

The interview conducted by ESL learners aims to illustrate how sociocultural context affects L2 learning and how sociocultural interactions impacts on L2 learners' minds and speech from different aspects. Thus, it will seek to answer the following questions.

RQ1: How does sociocultural context facilitate L2 learning? In what way?

RQ2: How does sociocultural interaction influence L2 learners' thinking and language development?

3.2 The Participants Information

There are three EFL participants aged 30s in this research, on top of that, they are willing to have interviews, and they reach an agreement that research findings will be put into publication, which is in line with ethical considerations.

Participant 1

The first participant, Candice, comes from Guangdong province, China, thereby Cantonese is her mother tongue. From kindergarten to primary school, she began to learn Mandarin Chinses in class but started to learn English (second language) at Year 3 in primary school. Afterwards, in next 6 years, she had been learning English as a foreign language in China. However, at the age of 16, she continued her high school education in Australia, followed by college education, she finally gained the Bachelor and Master degree in educational area, she has currently worked as a teacher for 9 years in Australia.

Participant 2

The second participant, Chelsea, also comes from China and Mandarin Chinese is her first language. In terms of learning background, she started learning English in primary school and continued her English learning throughout secondary school and college. At the same time, she chose English as major in 4-year college education in China, and she furthered 3-year education in Australia for gaining Master degrees in field of language education and interpretation. Nowadays, she has worked as an English-Chinese interpreter and part-time English teacher in Sydney, Australia.

Participant 3

The third participant, Nina, a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese and comes from China as well. Shared the same experienced, she received English learning since primary school in China, which lasted until she graduated from English major. Later, she also chose to further education in Australia, eventually gaining Master-degree of Education. At present, she has worked as a Mandarin and English teacher in a private school in Sydney, Australia.

3.3 Data Analysis and Key Findings

The study conducts interviews with three EFL participants separately with audio and recording devices, which is main source of data (Appendix-Interview Questions). The most of interview questions focus on learning and work experience in Australia, seeking to explore the changes of language learning

and use, and relationship between socio-cultural environment and language mindset.

Sample 1

Interviewer: Does the change of learning environment (from China to Australia) affect your language learning? In what way?

Candice (C1): When I moved to Australia, English has become more often to be used socially. In classroom level, I participate in activities conducted in English, such as group or pair work with my classmates. All the knowledge that teachers teach us, they use English as well. In social interaction, I also need to use a lot of English to make friends with others.

Chelsea (C2): There's a huge change. In Australia, I have to use English every day. I'm exposed to this English-speaking environment with people coming from all different countries and with different accents. So instead of struggling about the words, I'm more likely to pay more attention to how people will understand me, how I will get my message closed.

Nina: definitely. In Australia, I have to use the English in practical situations, I also need to start to learn a lot of conversational and communicative languages, including some slants idioms, and show humor in English as well.

As shown above, obviously, the transformation of language environment from China to Australia does influence three EFL learners' learning and use. In most cases, English is frequently used on daily basis, which is considered as a tool to maintain social communications, that echoes with the concept "Mediation" (Vygotsky, 1978) as a way to solve the problem or to achieve a goal.

In addition, from Candice's (C1) discourse, it is noticeable that she participates in different English tasks (i.e. pair / group work) in school setting, which may push her to engage in collaborative learning. In this sense, when L2 learners engage in collaborative activities, they are more likely to internalize new language, construct their own language system and produce language (Mitchell et al., 2013). With a similar assumption from Lantolf and Thorne (2006), they also insisted that language learners internalize new knowledge or skills through collaboration or communication. Apparently, the learning patter of peer-learner not only promotes Candice (C1) comprehensive skills (problem-solving and collaborative ability) but also language skills (listening and speaking).

Overall, using English as a tool enables three EFL learners to build interpersonal relationships and connections with people in authentic life. Under the circumstances of school and workplace, three EFL learners are provided with opportunities to learn and use English in an active way. Furthermore, instructions offered by peers and colleagues could facilitate language learning effectively.

Sample 2

Interviewer: Have you learned some cultural knowledge from Australia in and out of school? Does it benefit your language

learning and use?

Candice (C1): Yes, I do have to say that Australian culture has a lot of influences on my English learning because this is context that I am in. In high school, a lot of my friends were native speakers and the things they talk about in daily life has a huge impact on my knowledge about Australian culture, which also helps me to communicate with others in a better way. In working environment, it has mixed culture, multicultural backgrounds of my colleagues, students and their parents. In this sense, I need to stand in Australian culture, which means that I'm using Australian English for that time and then to influence them, influence the language they speak to fit in Australian culture.

Chelsea (C2): Definitely, I've learned some cultural knowledge. In Australia, people are very friendly, and they say hi to strangers, even on the street. So I feel like if you really used to the cultural here, then you're more likely to open your heart and to be connected with different people.

Nina: Definitely, I feel the very big differences is about the cultural knowledge in Australia. For example, in my actual working situation, I need to show the Chi-chat among my colleagues. So you need to be a little humorous at the same time, making jokes and attracting some attention. So that's something I feel I need to work on in English context.

According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), children's language and cognition are shaped by cultural factors. From the details of sample 2, it can be seen that three EFL learners have adapted themselves to the cultural environment they are living in. They may unconsciously perceive some Australian culture via daily interactions with her classmates and colleagues, which promotes positive communications with others and be more open-minded when faced with cultural diversity and exchange.

Similar assumption held by Lee (2016), he maintained that engaging in cultural practices are likely to promote people to create diversity of social relationships. From this viewpoint, it could explain that when three EFL participants are immersed in multi-cultural context, they are given opportunities to create interpersonal bonds with surroundings through daily communication, which leads to an unconscious impact on learners' minds and speech. In this case, it would become flexible for them to fit in local culture and build connections with different individuals. Thus, to some extent, what they experience may contribute to their cultural cognition and language mindset.

Sample 3

Interviewer: From your own experience, what ways of learning English do you find quite effective and practical for EFL learners?

Candice (C1): The first one is to learn as much as possible because the younger you are, the better you can learn because of theory about Critical Period. And the second suggestion is that do expose yourself in English rich environment and try to engage in this environment which will helps you a lot. The last suggestion is to create a context for yourself, you need to be

sensible about English, which means that once you get opportunities to use English, make best out of it. When you know how to use it, that is time you can acquire it.

Chelsea(C2): I think the environment is very important, because if you're immersed in this environment, you're more likely to use the language, and you won't feel embarrassed, even if you make a mistake, because you will not feel that people are trying to judge your pronunciation or grammar, because the focus of the communication is more like to get things done and to make people understand you.

Nina: Firstly, you can put yourself in the real-life context where English is the main language so that you have lots of opportunities to use English. Secondly, you need to conquer something in your heart. Don't be afraid of making mistakes, but actually we learn from making mistakes. And at the same time, taking language tests sometimes can motivate you to learn more.

From sample 3 given above, it is natural language context that three EFL learners highlight during process of learning, as it may provide opportunities to use language in real life. On top of that, the exposure to target language environment could serves as a platform to have more social interactions with English speakers. With this regard, it would be beneficial for EFL learners to internalize the knowledge and perform the tasks independently, which is a learning progress from social to individual (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Immersed in such cultural environment, language is not merely a tool to achieve communicative goals but potentially as a bridge to construct social speech with surroundings (Lantolf, 2007) in a broader view. Similar standpoint maintained by Conroy (2018), target language contexts can benefit learners' language development and cultural understanding because such contexts involve them in rich L2 input and push them to use language as much as possible.

3.4 Similarities and Differences Among Three EFL Learners

From what has been analyzed in detail above, there are some similarities and differences among three EFL participants.

In terms of similarities, three EFL participants share similar learning experience. They all come from China and have received English education since primary school. Besides, they have immersed in English-speaking environment (Australia) from study to work for 5 to 15 years in general. Living in such context, they are offered plenty of chances to use language via social interactions with teachers, peers and colleagues from diverse backgrounds. In this process, they tend to engage in collaborative work and may receive necessary instructions to complete tasks (scaffolding), which could possibly promote their language development. Meanwhile, sociocultural environment may have impacts on their way of thinking and language mindset when they involve in social contacts. With this, they are more likely to build interpersonal relationships and fit into local culture, which can be explained that they may have ability to "fit in" and grasp a skill to adapt to interactive environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). That is described as socio-cultural adaptation, but it would be influenced by different factors,

including cultural awareness, language fluency, duration of living in a foreign country and perception of affiliation towards certain culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Concerning differences among them, on one hand, the language proficiency would vary from persons to persons. Some of them belong to professional level, like Chelsea, who works as an English-Chinese interpreter, and she may be quite flexible in use of both languages. On the other hand, their learning motivations would be different in reality. Some of them are prone to fit in local life for language learning, like Candice, who has been living in Australia for nearly 15 years, and she may perceive and acquire more local cultural knowledge compared with other two participants.

In summary, the learning experience of three EFL learners are compatible with the ideas of socio-cultural theory (SCT). They agree that authentic language context does create opportunities to use language, having social interactions and establishing social bonds with people. Moreover, their way of thinking and language mindset are liable to be influenced by cultural environment they are living in, which would benefit their adoption to social activities as well.

4. Pedagogical Implications about L2 Learning and L2 Acquisition

From the case study discussed above, there will be some pedagogical implications about L2 learning and acquisition worth exploring.

Language can be learned and acquired through social interactions. When learners engage in authentic communications, they will attempt to learn and use language in an active way. In classroom-based setting, Danielewicz (2001) stated:

Collaborative learning creates a social context that helps students negotiate entry into the academic discourse community and acquire disciplinary knowledge. But, at the same time, their joint efforts will produce new knowledge, and eventually lead to a critique of accepted knowledge, conditions, and theories, as well as of the institutions that produce knowledge. (p.141)

For EFL/ESL learners, when they get involved in collaborative activities, language becomes the main tool to realize communicative meanings and goals. In the process of interaction, they may gain guidance and support from mentors and peers, which helps to co-construct and update their linguistic knowledge. In this sense, it seems that meaningful and productive language output can be generated by in-class interactions and collaborative learning.

In practice, from the view of constructivism, students in teams or in groups are encouraged to deal with problems that are related to socio-cultural context on their own (Weegar & Pacis, 2012), which may effectively foster their autonomous learning and independent thinking. In this case, it requires teachers to play a role of facilitator while students play a dominant role in class activities (Gray,1997). At the same time, teachers should be aware of their teaching objectives, specifically, based on students' prior knowledge, activities

design could help students to discover new ideas and co-construct their own understanding (Panhwar et al., 2016). Therefore, it is advised that teachers could empower students to be dominant in class and tackle problems by peer learning.

Beyond that, learning tasks also will function in real class for EFL/ESL learners because it depends on how they interpreter and complete tasks by joint interactions. Swain and Lapkin (2001) discovered that learners in collaborative work are offered scaffolding from meaning construction when they fulfill dictogloss and jigsaw tasks, which eventually helps them to acquire target language grammar. Yet, the process is also determined by some factors, including the difficulty of tasks and participants' cooperation ability.

In short, collaborative learning is highly valued in classroom context as it may serve as a medium to cultivate students' learning autonomy and co-construct their language system through peer interactions. Moreover, teachers, as class facilitator, task designer and organizer, need to consider a variety of factors, including task difficulty and complexity, and students' individual differences (i.e. learning styles, motivations, self-efficacy).

5.　Conclusion

This current research puts focus on how socio-cultural environment facilitates EFL learners' language learning and use. By analysis of interview samples, it can be concluded that EFL learners are prompted to use language when immersed in natural language environment, meanwhile, their way of thinking and language mindset are unconsciously influenced by cultural practices and social interactions. In and out of school, they tend to internalize the language and cultural knowledge they perceived from where they are living in, which can be considered as an ongoing process so far.

From the pedagogical perspective, SCT provides a clear framework for teachers to implement teaching activities in real class. Collaborative learning is a flexible and suitable option as it enables students to engage in peer interactions and allows them to gain necessary support from teachers. In teachers-students and peers-students models, it would be effective for students to complete learning tasks independently as well as to co-construct their new understanding of language.

However, there are some limitations noted in this study. On one hand, the case study can only represent typical samples but it cannot cover all samples in general, so the research needs to be tested in a longitudinal way for comprehensive and unbiased results. On the other hand, the data source is targeted at female adults so that other factors might be neglected, such as age and gender. if concerning these factors, the research results may be varied due to the opposite counterparts. With this regard, the future direction of this research can be extended in areas mentioned above.

Appendix - Interview Questions

1) Brief introduction (i.e. name, age and work)

2) Would you like to talk about your learning experience? (e.g.

educational background, years of learning English)

3) Does the change of learning environment (from China to Australia) affect your language learning? In what way?

4) Have you learned some cultural knowledge from Australia in and out of school? (e.g. school & workplace context) Does it benefit your language learning and use?

5) From your own experience, what ways of learning English do you find quite effective and practical for EFL learners?

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