



VOLUME 03, NO. 1, JUNE 2024

ALLEMANIA

Journal homepage:

<https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/allemania/index>



SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS IN MODERN PEDAGOGY

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Article Info

Paper Type:

Literature Review

Received: February 03, 2024

Revised: March 10, 2024

Accepted: April 30, 2024

First Available online: June 27, 2024

Publication Date: June 27, 2024

Abstract

There are few learning theories that able to survives the challenge of time. This study explores one of the prominent learning theories that have existed since the 80s, which is the Sociocultural theory. This study explains various aspects of sociocultural theory, particularly its basic principles, its development throughout the years, notable key scholars, and its implications toward modern pedagogy. Proposed by L.S Vygotsky and further developed by many experts such as; Wertsch, Rogoff, and Cole, the sociocultural theory is always improved to fit the current educational needs. Many studies explore its applicability in modern pedagogy and its benefits towards learning. This study concludes that sociocultural theory is a promising learning theory with various implications and benefits on today's pedagogy. Integrating sociocultural theory in modern teaching and learning processes proved to be beneficial for the students and the teachers as it provides much more versatility for the teaching and learning activity.

Keywords: *sociocultural, learning theory, modern pedagogy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent educational studies have evaluated the relationship between cultural background and individual motivations and cognitive processes in learning. Needless to say, it means that the way people obtain new knowledge varies greatly among one and another. This variety leads to the development of many learning theories proposed by experts. Among those experts, L. S. Vygotsky is one of the notable theorists from the psychology field. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, is known for his work on psychological development in children from his work on a framework that called "Zone of proximal development" (Cherry, 2020). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory considers social interactions as the essence of cognitive development which may differ among cultures. According to Vygotsky, children are born with basic mental capacity that enables them to perceive their surroundings and focusing on certain things. The roots of Sociocultural

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Theory date back to 18th and 19th century German Philosophy and prominent philosophers; namely, Hegel and Spinoza. Marx and Engels were also significantly influential in Vygotsky's development of the Sociocultural theory (Balbay & Dogan, 2018).

In this paper, the researcher intends to evaluate sociocultural theory based on previous researches that have been conducted to test and / or put this theory into practice. For the example, Utami (2016) evaluates how sociocultural theory may apply to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching, Helou & Newsome (2018) implement the sociocultural theory in the classroom to expand the understanding of the link between cognitive development and its application in classroom settings, and Castrillon (2017) examines how sociocultural theory may affect second language acquisition. These researches examine and test whether or not the sociocultural theory is applicable in recent years and what is the effect of the sociocultural theory of learning on practical learning activities. Therefore, the researcher intends to analyze sociocultural theory starts from its key concepts, the development through the years, and its implementation to today's learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning Through Socialization

Balbay & Dogan (2018) explain that there are three major principles in Vygotskian sociocultural theory. The first principle is that human development is social rather than cognitive or biological only. Vygotsky argues that in sociocultural theory, the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and fact whereas the individual dimension of consciousness is viewed as derivative and secondary. This has been expressed in his statement that "...every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky, 1979 in Helou & Newsome, 2018).

Furthermore, Vygotsky explains it further in The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of problem-solving they could achieve with the guidance of adults or more capable peers. Based on this argument, Vygotsky perceives that mental development is obtained through social interaction, especially through its specific structures and processes that are revealed by individuals during interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1979). In line with this, Utami (2016) also explains that to achieve a desired outcome of learning based on sociocultural theory, it is ideal that the learner(s) obtain help and communicate with other people to learn whether it is from more knowledgeable people such as; parents or teacher, or their peers such as; classmates or colleagues.

Vygotsky (1978, p. 90 in Allman, 2020) further argues that "the process of learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that can operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and with his peers". Based on this argument, learning is not seen as development as itself but a properly organized learning can result in mental development and able to encourage further development processes. Thus, the process of learning is a necessary and universal process to develop a culturally organized function of human psychology.

Secondly, the human learning process is a mediated process. It is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002 in Balbay & Dogan, 2018). The sociocultural approach to mediated activity proposes that the objective of a request is to define an account of human mental function that recognizes its intrinsic relationship to cultural, historical, and institutional settings (Wertsch & Toma, 1991).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development suggests that individuals' social origins and cultural identities are reflected in their use of psychological tools and semiotic signs (Phan, 2012). Therefore, it can be said that the cultural values of a certain individual may affect how they learn since there are basic differences in their values among people from different cultures, for example, one culture may value learning from their parents at home, while other may value learning from their teachers at school or even from respected elders in their society. These differences may affect how they learn because, in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, human development is a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society (McLeod, 2014).

What does it mean by mediated learning? First of all, mediated means that we as humans always find a tool to help us to achieve the desired outcome. For example, in the past, we used our hands to dig a hole in the ground but now we invent tools that specifically serve that purpose such as drill and shovel. The same thing can be said with learning, to maximize the effectivity of a learning process, human tends to use many tools to do that. In learning, we tend to use psychological mediation via conceptual and semiotic tools instead of a physical medium (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). However, Lantolf & Thorne (2007) further explain that this doesn't mean we cannot use material artifacts to learn, we as humans learn using both symbolic artifacts and material artifacts. Symbolic artifacts that human often use is language.

Vygotsky considers language as an essential tool in the learning process. A language is an essential tool in the learning process (McLeod, 2014). The importance of language in the learning process can be explained by these notions; First, language is an important medium during social interaction as language is used to assign meaning as a means to communicate in social settings (Allman, 2020). This means that children will discover that their community use language as a medium to convey meaning through their interaction with their closest community, for the example, their family. Afterward, they will realize there are meanings to these words and that meaning is shared within the community and then they begin to use these words to communicate with others to fulfill their needs. During this process of development, children also adopt the tone of voice, the way certain subjects are talked about, and the signs and symbols used to attach meanings to things and events, which eventually shape the value sets of that individual (Miller, 2011).

The third principle is that learning is situated. Social interaction is a critical component of situated learning learners become involved in a "community of practice" which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. To understand human learning behavior, researchers have to examine the human learning process more holistically rather than examining what is taking place in the human mind, or what is observable in human behavior separately (Balbay & Dogan, 2018).

Vygotsky argues that to evaluate the psychological development involved in learning, we have to evaluate the process and the product of that learning, only then we can see the psychological development involved in that learning (Harvey, 2011). Situatedness plays an

important role in the view of sociocultural theory, the effectiveness of a learning process depends heavily on the situations or circumstances it happens (Adela & Gutiérrez, 2006). In a situated perspective, cognition is not regarded as a private, solo activity, but is distributed outside the individual, to other persons and artifacts. “Thinking” and learning are something we participate in.

Human knowledge, insights, conventions, and concepts are “built into” artifacts, and are something we interact with when we use them. As we have concluded from previous principles, learning in sociocultural theory provided or happens during social interactions between individuals. Billett (1996) argues that knowledge needs to be placed on various conditions for it to be robust. Therefore, for a more meaningful learning process, the knowledge being transferred must be “durable”. A durable knowledge means that it is applicable in various situations through the problem-solving abstraction process (Lave, 1988 in Billett, 1996). Furthermore, Lave & Wenger (1991) explains that learning is a situated activity that has its central defining characteristic that they call legitimate peripheral participation. “Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way for us to relate between the newcomers and old-timers, activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. Legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a way to explain the relationship between social practice and learning as an integral constituent. Thus, situated learning is usually unintentional rather than deliberate.

There is another important concept that exists in sociocultural theory. It is the concept of scaffolding. This concept is integrally related to one of the principles of Vygotsky's work, the Zone of Proximal Development. To understand scaffolding, we must evaluate what is Zone of Proximal Development first. Vygotsky (1978) sees the Zone of Proximal Development as the area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance should be given to children to help them develop new skills and to encourage them to develop higher mental functions (McLeod, 2014).

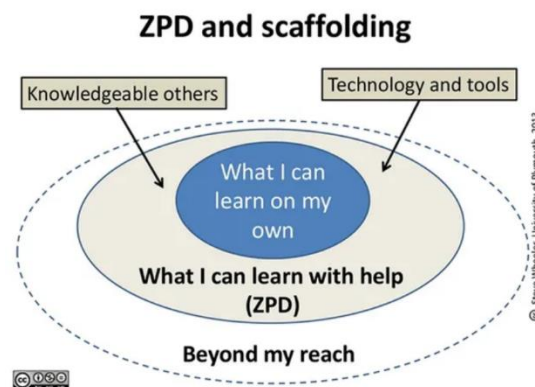


Figure 1. ZPD and scaffolding (McLeod, 2014)

Furthermore, Wood et al. (1976) explain how scaffolding can be conducted. Scaffolding is conducted by someone who is considered to be more knowledgeable to guide a learner to achieve a better outcome. Essentially, the scaffolder guides the learners to learn step by step on certain skills or topics, therefore, enabling them to focus on the subject that is manageable to solve for them. By doing this, the scaffolder then raises the difficulty or reduces the amount of assistance to

further the learner's ability to solve the problem(s) by themselves. The ideal outcome of scaffolding is that when the "learners' comprehension of the solution must precede production". This means that the learner must be able to recognize a solution to a particular level of problems before he can produce the steps leading to other problems without assistance.

2.2 Sociocultural Theory Through the Ages

Sociocultural theory is believed to be most affected by the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934). He was a talented scholar with broad interests, an accomplished researcher, and a prolific writer. Vygotsky's goal was "to create a new and comprehensive approach to human psychological processes" (Miller, 2011). He was closely familiar with the works of his contemporaries such as Pavlov as well as Piaget, Binet, and Freud and often commented on their ideas. His thinking was also influenced by philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, and Engels. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 37, only ten years after his professional career in psychology began (Miller, 2011). Shortly after Vygotsky's death, his manuscripts were banned in the USSR for political reasons. It was not until the late 1960s when his work was allowed to be published again. Vygotsky first became known in the West when his *Language and Thought* was translated in 1962 (Allman, 2020).

Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, as he believes strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning" (McLeod, 2014). At the time, Vygotsky's theory is closely similar to Piaget's theory of development mainly because both psychologists focus on understanding cognitive processes and development in children (Allman, 2020). However, McLeod (2014) further explains that there are several aspects of Vygotsky's theory that differ greatly from Piaget's theory.

First, Vygotsky places more emphasis on culture affecting cognitive development. This put his theory in contrast with Piaget who argues that cognitive development is mostly universal across cultures. Second, Vygotsky places considerably more emphasis on social factors contributing to cognitive development. As we know, from the concept of ZPD, Vygotsky emphasizes social aspects on development whereas Piaget's theory views development as an independent exploration in which children construct knowledge of their own. Third, Vygotsky places more (and different) emphasis on the role of language in cognitive development.

Piaget views language as a dependent aspect of thought for its development (i.e., thought comes before language). For Vygotsky, thought and language are initially separate systems from the beginning of life, merging at around three years of age, producing verbal thought (inner speech). For Vygotsky, cognitive development results from an internalization of language. Fourth, Vygotsky argues that adults are an important source of cognitive development. Adults transmit their culture's tools of intellectual adaptation that children internalize. In contrast, Piaget emphasizes the importance of peers, as peer interaction promotes social perspective-taking.

Another scholar who makes valuable contributions towards the development of sociocultural theory is James V. Wertsch. In his article *From Social Interaction to Higher Psychological Processes. A Clarification and Application of Vygotsky's Theory* (1979), he argues that the ideas about self-regulation can be properly understood only if we conduct an inherent analysis that refers to the origins of self-regulation. This means that by providing other regulations (rules), an adult will support a child to carry out a necessary task. By doing so, it means that

through communication, a child can develop one's self-regulating ability. These self-regulative capacities are seen as emerging as the result of the child's taking over the communicative and regulative responsibilities formerly carried out by the adult.

This article explains that child development is transmitted through social interaction between a child (learner) and an adult (more knowledgeable other). Wertsch's claims further support Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, as we know that ZPD is the area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance should be given to children to help them develop new skills and to encourage them to develop higher mental functions (McLeod, 2014). Wertsch claims prove that there is a "zone" where learners have the potential to learn, but they need help to achieve those potentials. Additionally, in his book entitled *Vygotsky and the social formation of Mind* in 1985, Wertsch offers a synthesis and critique of all Vygotsky's major ideas. He also presents a program for using Vygotskian theory as a guide to contemporary research in the social sciences and humanities. He draws extensively on all Vygotsky's works, both in Russian and in English, as well as on his studies in the Soviet Union with colleagues and students of Vygotsky. Furthermore, in 1988, Wertsch also published an overview of Vygotsky's theory in his article entitled *L.S. Vygotsky's "New" Theory of Mind* where he explained Vygotsky's personal background and the basis of his theory. Wertsch's effort is undeniably contributing heavily to the spread of Vygotsky's theory in the west.

Over the years, many have offered many different interpretations of the concept of the 'zone of proximal development. Some have restricted the use of the concept to child development. For example, Rogoff has argued that the 'zone' is a dynamic region of sensitivity to learning the skills of a culture in which children develop through guided participation in problem-solving with more experienced members of the culture (Rogoff 1991 in Guile & Young, 1998). Furthermore, Rogoff is able to extend Vygotsky's focus on the basic teacher/student relationship to include the links between children, their caregivers, and other companions. This means that she is able to understand how they learn to participate in skilled cultural activities. Another expert that defines ZPD is Davydov. He argues that the 'zone' refers to a 'cultural region' where children can correlate the new knowledge they found and the existing knowledge they have (Davydov, 1985 in Guile & Young, 1998).

Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman (1978) in their book *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. L. S. Vygotsky compile a selection of Vygotsky's essays that outline his dialectical-materialist theory of cognitive development. While suggests that to understand the mind, we cannot separate it from its surrounding society, since humans use tools to shape their inner world, as well as the world around them and society, provides the technology that can be used to shape the private processes of the mind. Furthermore, in 1996, John-Steiner & Mahn proposed a framework in their paper *Sociocultural Approaches to Learning and Development: A Vygotskian Framework*. This framework developed to apply the sociocultural approach to learning and development toward practical applications in the classroom. They focused on the basic principle of Vygotskian sociocultural theory which is; social sources of individual development, semiotic mediation, and genetic analysis.

They aim to implement Vygotsky's theory to resolve the cultural problems in education to deliver instructions that are much more crafted to fit students' needs, especially the linguistically and culturally diverse who historically have been marginalized by traditional models of pedagogy. Through these publications, the sociocultural theory has been concluded to be suitable for

implementation in formal educational institution as the framework for it to work on such context is already formulated and ready to be tested further.

However, the sociocultural theory has met numerous criticisms as some experts provide some concerns regarding its limitations. The first limitation is related to Vygotsky's early death as many of his theories remained incomplete. Furthermore, his work is largely unknown until fairly recently due to political reasons and issues with translation. The second major limitation is associated with the vagueness of the ZPD. Individuals may have wide or narrow zones, which may be both desirable and undesirable, depending on the circumstances. Knowing only the width of the zone "does not provide an accurate picture of their learning, ability, style of learning, and current level of development compared to other children of the same age and degree of motivation" (Miller, 2011).

Additionally, there is little known about whether a child's zone is comparable across different learning domains, with different individuals, and whether the size of the zone changes over time. There is no concrete framework as to how to measure someone's ZPD (Miller, 2011). Finally, Rogoff points out that Vygotsky's theories may not be relevant to all cultures as originally thought. She argues that in some culture, verbal instructions may be delivered in a whole way than it is in some other culture. Thus, it is safe to assume that it will not equally effective in all cultures for all types of learning (McLeod, 2014; Rogoff, 1990 in Allman, 2020).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Now, the researcher would like to discuss about the implementation of sociocultural theory. The sociocultural theory of learning has been evaluated many times by various researchers. To note, a recent study by Utami (2016) is based on the paradigm that since Vygotskian sociocultural theory or social constructivism focuses more on assisted-discovery learning, therefore, the implementation of this theory into teaching would be implemented as collaborative learning and situated learning. She elaborates that Vygotskian sociocultural theory has several implications for EFL teaching, namely; first, in planning and implementing a lesson, teachers must pay attention to the group of children who has problems solving a certain task. This is reflecting the characteristics of the concept of scaffolding in sociocultural theory whereas the teacher must guide the students step by step and gradually increase the difficulty of the materials so that the students can follow it easier (Wood et al., 1976).

Specific to this subject, Utami (2016) gives an example based on that English teachers have to provide various types and levels of assistance that can facilitate children so that they can solve the problems they face. This assistance can be in the form of providing examples of English phrases, instructions, or guidelines for working on an article/essay, giving feedback on the quality of speaking, listening, reading, or writing. Second, guidance or assistance from adults or friends who are more competent or known in English as MKO (More Knowledgeable Others) is very effective in increasing the productivity of learning English. Third, groups of children who are still experiencing difficulties even though they have been given various assistance, maybe because the problem is too difficult, need to be given questions that they can work on with the help/guidance of others. Fourth, cooperative learning is also an application of the Vygotsky concept. This is because students construct their knowledge through interacting with their friends.

In conclusion, Utami's (2016) research concludes a similar point to what Wood et al. (1976) formulated in their scaffolding concept. She points out that by using scaffolding, teachers will be able to achieve the learning goal more effectively and efficiently. However, in Utami's research, she focusses on its implementation on EFL teaching, therefore, it can be said that this research has a more specified target audience which is for EFL teachers.

Other research that has been examining the effect of sociocultural theory on learning is research by Helou & Newsome (2018). Their research explores the prominent contributions of Lev Vygotsky as well as discusses the implications of employing experiential and peer learning in classroom settings (Helou & Newsome, 2018). This research concludes that Vygotsky's notions and views on cognitive development and learning are applicable in the classroom by integrating it into the classroom activities, assessments, aided learning techniques, and student interactions. Furthermore, they proposed that it is important that the teachers/educators familiarize themselves with their students' cultural backgrounds.

The results of their research correlate the role of language as a cultural tool impacting learning, and the way sociolinguistics are varied by culture in ways that may not be coherent with the expectations of tertiary institutions, also support Vygotsky's views on the prominent role of language and its crucial effects on cognitive development. Furthermore, the data connected to the influence of more capable peer-supported involvement on the conceptual skills of students, and their learning, further reinforce Vygotsky's theories in that supported learning necessitates the assistance of a more capable peer.

As Vygotsky states that mental development is obtained through social interaction, especially through its specific structures and processes that are revealed by individuals during interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1979). This means that through interaction with more capable peers, the learning process could occur. The perspectives of both educators and students on cognitive abilities, the Vygotskian framework is vividly represented by self-instruction and apprenticeships in this research.

To further investigate the implementation of the sociocultural theory of learning, the researcher evaluates another research by Castrillón (2017) entitled *The Effects of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory on Second Language Acquisition and Language Input*. Based on the argument made by Vygotsky, which states that "for learning to happen, both suitable input and output should be facilitated in explicit instruction", this research intends to evaluate the sociocultural theory's impact on second language acquisition. This argument is in line with the key concept of the sociocultural theory which states that learning is situated where the effectiveness of a learning process depends heavily on the situations or circumstances it happens (Adela & Gutiérrez, 2006).

This research uses a new teaching method called Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol or SIOP, which is aimed at foreigners whose mother tongue is not English and specifically aimed at student-level English for educational purposes. This teaching method is correlated deeply with the scaffolding method; thus, the purpose of this teaching method is to provide a suitable guideline toward students' zone of proximal development. This Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol or SIOP method requires teachers to be familiar with the student's experiences, this is not limited to their academic background and performance but also their personal background like cultures.

Castrillón argues that no matter how meaningful or high-quality material is, it is useless if they are not manipulated to be suitable with students' ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and

encouraged with social interaction. In line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, teachers should be constantly interacting with their learners at different levels. For example, by assigning homework with challenging input tasks to be carried out individually, teachers can find out students' progress and observe performance expectations for the course. In this instance, the role of more knowledgeable others plays significant importance toward students' learning since this homework may be beyond students' capability, thus the students need to be guided to complete their tasks if they cannot complete them by themselves. This research concludes that by using SIOP or scaffolding, ESL teachers can deliver materials better to the students and increase students' ability to understand the materials better since it is specifically conditioned to be suitable for students' abilities and backgrounds.

4. CONCLUSION

This research review intends to inform the readers of a broader perspective towards sociocultural theory specifically its implications and applications in modern pedagogy. From this paper, we know how sociocultural theory was developed by L.S. Vygotsky and how it has evolved through the years. Sociocultural theory is a promising learning theory with many useful implications for the teaching and learning process in modern education. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has been evaluated and developed further by many experts so that it will be more suitable for implementation nowadays. This has led us to many implementations of sociocultural theory in educational institutions around the world and also led us towards many types of research which evaluates its merits or even its weakness.

We knew that Vygotsky's learning theory began as a child development theory, however, the implication of his theory is widely applicable and it has been found that it is applicable regardless of generation. Most notably, Vygotsky argues that culture is one of the most important aspects that can affect someone's learning ability and style. It is also worth noting that the social aspect and cultural aspect cannot be separated since both of them affect the other considerably. The sociocultural theory implications on modern pedagogy may be sufficiently reflected through this paper. However, further explorations may be needed for this subject since there are still many sources to evaluate that explain more on sociocultural theory's benefits and weaknesses.

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