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Sociocultural Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching: The Role of Praxis

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The social psychologist Kurt Lewin famously wrote, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (1952, p. 169). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has strong links to practical activities in the real world, and TBLT theory and research contributes to pedagogical practice. However, the relationship between theory and practice is primarily one-way, according to Bygate (2016), who argues that TBLT theory is tested in practice more often than practice is shaped by the theory.

It is a different matter, however, if one focuses on TBLT research conducted in sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT addresses the relationship between theory and practice through *praxis*, the idea that theory guides practice and practice shapes theory (see Vygotsky, 1987). Praxis is central to a sociocultural approach to second language learning and teaching (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernolle, 2015), including research on tasks. In this article I look at how SCT contributes to TBLT through praxis.

In the first section of this article, I compare the practical relevance and psycholinguistic rationales underlying TBLT and SCT. I then provide a brief account of SCT that focuses on the core concepts of mediation and internalization. The rest of the article focuses on four contributions SCT research has made to TBLT that show how practice shapes theory. I conclude with the implications of praxis.

PRACTICAL RELEVANCE AND PSYCHOLINGUISTIC RATIONALES

Proponents of TBLT hold that tasks are pedagogically useful, practically relevant, and psycholinguistically valid. Perhaps no one has argued as strongly as Long (2015) that these qualities are related to a specific understanding of TBLT based on the cognitive-interactionist theory (CIT) of instructed second language acquisition. Long does not consider SCT to make much of a contribution because of its "nebulous core constructs" (p. 35). However, SCT concepts are researched using visible social processes and based on early neurological research that contributed to the development of modern psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics (Levelt, 2013). Arguably, acquisition, which Chomsky famously located in a *black box*, is no less nebulous than internalization.

In any case, an inclusive approach that acknowledges the research contributions of SCT reflects the views of other strong proponents of TBLT, which is evident in books by Ellis (2003), Samuda and Bygate (2008), and Van den Branden (2006). Research studies explicitly include both SCT and CIT concepts and methods (e.g., Foster & Ohta, 2005; Eckerth, 2008); many others draw on SCT methods, such as analyzing learner interactions for language-related episodes (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Robinson's (2011) overview of task issues describes how internalization has made several contributions to task research. Another SCT contribution is its caution in attributing psycholinguistic validity to tasks themselves. Although tasks influence learner responses, their value is in the significance that learners find in them (Lantolf, 2011).

SCT: MEDIATION AND INTERNALIZATION

Many species have innate mental functions similar to those of human beings. What then accounts for the remarkable accomplishments of humans? Proponents of SCT argue that innate mental

functions are mediated through social and cultural systems: symbols, especially language; concepts, which are developed through language; and activities conducted in language, such as parenting and schooling. These external mediating processes become internalized as the learner gains control over them and as they are integrated with other processes. In particular, through schooling learners are expected to learn purposefully, which requires inhibiting automatic responses (Vygotsky, 1986/1934). For language learners this begins with inhibiting reliance on the first language (L1) in order to control their use of the second language (L2) while more automatic L2 responses develop.

Lantolf and Poehner (2014) argue that this view of learning and development is compatible with the declarative procedural model (Ullmann, 2012). Child learning is based on procedural knowledge, whereas adult learning also involves, and tends to be reliant on, declarative knowledge. The two types of knowledge do not convert into each other, although they may interact, develop in parallel, and have similar observable outcomes. Ullmann (2005) uses the development of lexical knowledge to argue that the two memory systems can act both cooperatively and competitively. As lexical items develop declaratively, grammatical knowledge develops procedurally, with the systems acting cooperatively. However, declarative learning "may eventually depress" (Ullmann, 2005, p. 149) procedural learning, with the systems acting competitively. This brain-based account aligns with the mediational role of schooling in fostering reliance on declarative knowledge, which Vygotsky and Luria researched (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

SCT researchers, therefore, advocate a greater role for the development of declarative language knowledge than do most proponents of TBLT. The goal of having declarative knowledge "is not simply the internalization of concepts, in the banal sense of memorization, but also development of the learner's capacity to use concepts to mediate (i.e., self-regulate) their language performances" (Negueruela & Lantolf, 2006, p. 98). Tasks, perhaps more than other communicative activities, offer opportunities for such use, but without high-quality conceptual knowledge of the L2, learners will internalize L2 concepts that are mediated by the L1 in ways that may either support or hinder successful L2 communication. The role of pedagogy is therefore to provide high-quality conceptual knowledge that can helpfully mediate the learner's ability to make meaning. Researchers can then examine how learning develops in social activity, such as learners' explanations of concepts and interactions in tasks. Internalization is a powerful research construct because it enables researchers to literally see learning by focusing on its external social origins that are re-externalized by learners.

SOCIAL MEDIATION

The most prolific SCT research using tasks is on language learning in social processes such as classroom interactions. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is one example of how practice has shaped theory within SCT. The *received* version of the ZPD is of an expert scaffolding a learner until the learner can perform independently, which is based on a limited reading of Vygotsky's (1998) work (Chaiklin, 2003). SCT L2 studies have shown that a ZPD can be constructed among peers (Donato, 1994) and in whole classes between teachers and students and among students (Guk & Kellogg, 2007). Guk and Kellogg suggested teacher–class task interactions promoted mediation, while student–student task interactions promoted internalization. This alternative to mainstream TBLT approaches to how task conditions influence learning demonstrates praxis. The strength of many (if not all) of these SCT studies is that they are conducted in intact classrooms.

Close analysis of the quality of collaboration (Donato, 1994; Storch, 2002) is another SCT contribution. The research agenda of Storch and her co-authors has examined different facets of collaboration in classroom learners, often situated within SCT and often involving tasks. Storch (2002) identified four patterns of dyadic interaction based on two scales, mutuality and equality, showing that collaborative and expert–novice interactions were more effective for scaffolding and transferring knowledge than dominant–dominant and dominant–passive dyads. Besides making a theoretical contribution to collaboration and scaffolding (which Storch relates to the ZPD), Storch's research shows how classroom group dynamics influence learning opportunities in tasks.

As the key construct in TBLT, negotiation of meaning has also been examined in both CIT and SCT perspectives (e.g., Foster & Ohta, 2005). In SCT, an alternative theoretical construct is mediational sequences, which includes the shift from task work to pedagogical support, the negotiation of support, and the shift back to task work (van Compernolle, 2015). Incidental microgenesis may occur within a mediational sequence with "the qualitative transformation of a mental function—that is, the process of internalization is evident" (van Compernolle, 2015, p. 79). Drawing on conversation analysis, van Compernolle identifies external signals of internalization in language and paralanguage, gestures, and other physical actions, showing how they contribute to self-repair and transfer in both communicative and awareness-raising tasks. He also distinguishes incidental microgenesis from incidental learning, "the accumulation of discrete content

knowledge and/or skills" (p. 79). Given the important role that incidental learning through reactive focus on form plays in CIT accounts (Long, 2015), incidental microgenesis could contribute to both SCT and TBLT, especially in classrooms.

Another area of SCT task research is learner interpretation of goals, following Coughlan and Duff (1994). That study showed that different learners and the same learner on different occasions performed the same workplan task as different activities. Cross (2011) has furthered this line of research by using activity theory with classroom learners to analyze how and why two learners' goals converged and diverged, differently influencing their task performances and collaboration. The role of learner interpretations of task goals, particularly in classrooms, has been acknowledged as a significant contribution to TBLT research (Ellis, 2003).

SELF-MEDIATION

Because language is the primary means of semiotic mediation, it is not surprising that its role in L2 learning has been extensively researched in SCT task studies, generating several research agendas. The earliest Western SCT research in L2 learning used a picture-strip narrative task to show how less proficient learners used more private language than more proficient learners, suggesting that the less proficient learners were using private language to self-mediate or self-regulate (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985), which has been corroborated by other studies. These and other studies have examined how individual learners use processes developed in social contexts such as classrooms to mediate themselves and so develop more autonomous control of their learning.

The quality of learner discourse is another early major contribution of SCT to TBLT research (e.g., Brooks & Donato, 1994). Of particular importance is Swain's theoretical development of the role that language production plays in language learning. This development is evident in the changing terms that Swain has used, from *producing output* (Swain, 1985) to *collaborative dialogue* (Swain, 1997) to *talking-it-through* (Swain & Lapkin, 2002) to *languaging,* "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 98). Swain (1997) describes how a turning point in this research agenda was recognizing the value of focusing on what learners do, rather than making assumptions about what tasks would make them do, which reflects how practice can shape research and, through it, theory. Languaging asks learners to explain the reasoning behind their language choices to others (e.g., in the classroom) or to

themselves (e.g., as "homework"; see Negueruela, 2003), which enables learners to better develop their understanding of how meaning is constructed through forms. Languaging is praxical: It provides a bridge between the classroom and the rest of the world by giving learners a concrete means by which they can self-mediate outside the classroom.

Another research agenda related to private language is L1 gestures, which Gullberg and McCafferty (2008) argue are part of internalization. Some SCT research combines gestures and thinking for speaking (Slobin, 1996) to show how typological differences in the expression of time and motion in the L1 mediate L2 learning, even at the highest proficiency levels (Lantolf, 2011). Interestingly, a TBLT study has also focused on how typological differences in the L1 can influence the expression of motion in the L2. Cadierno and Robinson (2009) explored this hypothesis by comparing Japanese, which expresses motion in typologically different ways from English, and Danish, which expresses motion in typologically similar ways to English. The results showed that complex task design features positively influenced the Danish speakers and negatively influenced the Japanese speakers. This suggests that the task design was not sufficient to prompt noticing of L1-mediated expressions of motion. Further languaging (and gesture) research could offer insights into how explicit knowledge of L2 concepts interacts with different task design features. In other words, would a clear L2 concept have enabled the Japanese learners to overcome their L1 inclinations? Concept-based instruction offers another SCT approach to overcoming the effects of L1, and so the issue of task design will be returned to in the next section.

CONCEPT-BASED INSTRUCTION, ATTENTION, AND TASKS

Concept-based instruction (CBI) levels the target language playing field for learners. Native speakers make appropriate language choices by relying on their experience-based intuitions, but they are often unable to explain why their choices are appropriate. As thinking for speaking research has shown, nonnative speakers have intuitions in their prior language(s) that may conflict with the target language. Because such intuitions may be below consciousness, they may be difficult to notice or understand, especially if feedback is incidental and implicit. The aim of concept-based instruction (CBI) is to mediate learning by systematically developing attention to and use of concepts to guide and monitor learner actions. The key features of an SCT concept are that it be systematic and complete. In second language

learning, this means concepts taught to learners should be linguistically sound in the fullest meaning of *linguistic*: that learners need to understand the roles of form, function, and use in making meaning in concrete situations.

Several studies have followed variations on Gal'perin's (1992) concept-based or systemic-theoretical instruction (e.g., Negueruela, 2003; Wall, 2015). Gal'perin's method involved the use of an orienting chart that visually and verbally summarizes the core concepts of a subject. Learners not only guide themselves with the chart, but are expected to overtly verbalize its contents to themselves and to others, then covertly, until they know it. Being able to use a concept without any reliance on the chart signals the concept has been internalized. For example, van Compernolle (2011) provides evidence of an English-speaking learner developing a deeper understanding of French address form choices. Although the learner often made appropriate choices prior to concept-based instruction, she did so based on rules of thumb, which could be misleading. Following concept-based instruction, she had a clearer understanding informed by sociolinguistic concepts (i.e., indexical orders). Although SCT pragmatic studies typically use verbal explanations in conjunction with discourse completion tests and role-plays, pedagogical and real-world tasks could provide better quality evidence of learner internalization.

Attention is central in both CBI and TBLT research. According to Gal'perin (1989), attention develops by explicitly selecting and checking a mental action against an image (e.g., of an orienting chart), but after it forms it becomes abbreviated (i.e., proceduralized). One merit of systematically developed knowledge is that it can then be systematically accessed to address breakdowns in proceduralized processes (e.g., under stress and in novel situations).

As mentioned above, Robinson's cognition hypothesis (2003) sequences tasks based on how task dimensions, such as complexity, mediate the allocation of cognitive resources, such as attention. Concept-based instruction develops learner attention and practices its use in checking language performances. To elaborate the suggestion made about Cadierno and Robinson's (2009) study, a TBLT study that included CBI would predict that conceptual knowledge addresses increasing demands on resource-directing dimensions that promote language development, while verbalization speeds up access to that knowledge, thereby addressing resource-dispersing dimensions aimed at language performance. An SCT take on such a study would be likely to focus on how individual learners used mediational resources, such as orienting charts, and whether there was any evidence of them being used to guide or check performances during meaningful communication.

DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT

It may be necessary to underline that SCT does not eschew all predictions; instead, it relates them to praxis. Vygotsky (1998) believed that prediction was one way that theory became practical in pedagogy. For example, Chaiklin (2003) describes how the ZPD provided a theoretical basis for pedagogical *diagnosis* of learning potential. Today this line of thought is evident in dynamic assessment (DA), in which the way a learner uses mediation shows what the learner is both currently and potentially capable of doing (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Poehner, 2008). DA is therefore closely connected to the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

DA in L2 development has its origins in a study that looked at scaffolded or graduated corrective feedback on writing (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). In graduated corrected feedback, the least explicit feedback is provided to the learner, and if the learner is unable to make corrections then more explicit feedback is provided until the learner understands the error and its correction. This approach could be applied in tasks by carefully scaffolding the provision of incidental feedback; in fact, many teachers "naturally" do this. DA techniques, in other words, can be used in teaching without necessarily using them to formally assess learning. However, for research purposes, the potential for using DA as a systematic means of assessing task performance is precisely its value. Poehner and Lantolf (2003) offer several suggestions for integrating tasks and DA.

There are different approaches to DA, but those most compatible with SCT are aimed at development, not just learning a specific skill or completing a particular task. One such approach is that of Feuerstein (Feuerstein, Falik, & Feuerstein, 1998), who held views that aligned with the Vygotskian notion of praxis (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Lantolf and Poehner focus on Feuerstein's notions of reciprocity in interactions (i.e., intersubjectivity, showed in a shared perspective) and transcendence (i.e, internalization, shown in the transfer of learning) as indicators of cognitive change and development, both of which are relevant to task research. There are also other indicators and a set of task dimensions: novelty of content, modality, phase, operation, complexity, abstraction, and efficiency. These might be worth examining either within or as an alternative to the triadic componential framework of task categories (condition, difficulty, and complexity) and dimensions (resource-dispersing and resource-directing).

Task-supported research involving dynamic assessment might revitalize process–product studies. One recent CIT study that compared task-supported and task-based instruction (Li, Ellis, & Zhu, 2016)

showed significant effects for explicit instruction in learners with some prior knowledge of the tested language features, but the authors note their study focused on the product, not the process. It would be interesting to know how a study that focused on processes and included CBI and DA would compare to traditional explicit instruction. It would also be interesting to know whether DA techniques can be used to teach new concepts, given that, as Li, Ellis, and Zhu point out, there is limited research on it in TBLT. Identifying new language that learners have "mined" from tasks (such as from instructions) but have not yet internalized (i.e., it is not transferred to other tasks), could be addressed through DA in order to show whether it was in the learners' ZPD.

CONCLUSION

The multiple contributions of SCT research using tasks shows praxis: SCT studies have influenced and extended SCT theory as well as applied and tested it. They have also contributed to how task research in CIT is conducted, particularly in the detailed analysis of learner language and the impact of learner interpretations and social dynamics. It would be interesting to see further mainstream engagement with more current SCT research in meditational sequences, languaging, the role of the L1, concept-based instruction, and dynamic assessment, as well as further SCT engagement with tasks.

Studies about language learning and teaching often have conflicting results. Given the many changing influences on language learning, it seems unlikely that results will ever be definitive. As the world changes, so will the real-world tasks to be accomplished and the many mediational means that shape human development. Perhaps the complexity of the subject matter—human beings and their social and mental processes—defies what statistical predictions and generalizations can effectively capture. SCT instead seeks to find the general in the particular. It is fundamentally experimental research, and while it does not eschew statistics, it is worth underlining that experimental research does not necessarily entail statistical testing.

Statistical generalizations certainly work well for answering some research questions, but not for responding to the demands of pedagogy. Individual teachers teach individual students. Perhaps one reason why teachers are as wary as they are weary of putatively new ideas is precisely because of the students they know who they suspect will not be helped. Perhaps that reason is also why teachers become passionately attached to some ideas, including the ZPD and scaffolding, which have immediate intuitive plausibility.

Praxis is about taking teachers and learners seriously enough to investigate them (which is why teacher and learner cognition research is important). Both SCT and TBLT researchers have taken teachers and learners seriously. The promise that these two approaches to language teaching and learning share is found in praxis. More praxis needs more practice.

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