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Reframing English Language Education in Japan

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Abstract

This article explores how English Education in Japan should be planned and performed from the sociocultural perspective and is based on the belief that mediation plays a significant role for human development and learning. This paper supports the idea that (with the consideration of sociocultural theory) teaching should not only focus on the development of linguistic knowledge but also help to foster students' abilities to learn and think independently as their awareness of identity, culture, and society develop and expand in formal classroom settings.

Key Words: Sociocultural; theory, Zone of Proximal development, English education curriculum

Sociocultural thought and language teaching

Sociocultural approaches to learning and development were first organized and applied by L. S. Vygotsky in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. They are based on the concept that learning can develop effectively when learners use their minds and available tools while engaged in activities. Language is, of course, one of the major tools, but other things like gesture can be included as well. According to Wertsch (1985), the sociocultural perspective

encompasses social interaction as contingent upon language and gesture which are appropriated by the individual to form the instrumental tools for thinking and problem solving.

There are four essential points related to sociocultural theory: mediation, thinking and speaking, zone of proximal development (ZPD), and interaction.

Mediation

Lantolf (2000) addresses that “the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated” (p.1). Mediation takes place as long as human beings have an opportunity to consider what they are doing or what they have just learned. This permits us to connect and extend our knowledge and skills for further learning which may affect our beliefs, views of the world, identity, and cultural and social awareness.

Thinking and Speaking

Vygotsky viewed the initial function of speech as a mediator (Minick, 1997). In the process of speaking, they check whether their words or sentences are appropriate in each situation or not, whether their speaking is what they want to tell or not, how much they understand what they want to tell or what they have just listened to or learned, what their interlocutor’s reaction (e.g., facial expression, verbal response) is, and so on.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

In addition, Vygotsky emphasized the essential role of zone of proximal development

(ZPD) in learning. He defined it as the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). According to the concept of ZPD, learners can move into their next level with their peers' or teachers' assistance while using language as the primary tool during this activity.

Interaction

In the ZPD, we notice that it is indispensable for learners to interact with others because the ZPD needs at least more than two people to actively develop. Vygotsky claimed that speech is the most widely used and important means employed by humans to organize social interaction, to regulate others, and to regulate oneself (Wertsch, 1981, p.24). With effective interaction, especially through speaking with their peers or teachers, learners naturally develop and extend their linguistic knowledge.

The Curriculum of English Education for Lower Secondary Schools (Grades 7-9) in Japan

In recent years the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has been emphasizing a renewed vision of English language education. However, if the vision proposed by MEXT is to be realized then we administrators, teachers, and teacher-educators in Japan may need to approach English language teaching from a

different perspective that incorporates more opportunities for authentic language use during communicative, goal-oriented activities in smaller classrooms.

It is worth stating that sociocultural theory, per se, is not a theory of second language acquisition or second language learning. But, it is a theory of general human development, interaction, and learning where (as previously stated) we use language to mediate the world around us. This, in turn, assists in second language learning.

We now move on to describe past English Education in Japan and examine what (MEXT) emphasizes today and the purpose of English Education. The focus here is on lower secondary schools, junior high schools, for 7th to 9th grade students.

Traditional English Education

In the past, teaching styles were very teacher-centered. Arguably, the traditional purpose of English Education in Japan has as only passing entrance examinations. The emphasis to learn English was on grammar, reading, and writing skills that dominate the most part of the entrance examinations. The purpose of English curriculum in Japan was to train students to read and write English, relying on grammatical analysis and translation to and from Japanese as the primary methods. To achieve this, students practiced a lot of drills and repetitions so that they could get accustomed to grammar that was also the key to translate analytically to and from Japanese in reading and writing. Dorfman also reported that students had 105 classes per year, and they were supposed to learn approximately 350

words each year.

English education, in the above framework, is teacher-centered. As Wray (1999) describes, there were almost no opportunities for students to discuss, provide their opinions, or do group problem solving. One of the reasons for this instruction was due to the large number of students in one class. There were about forty or more students per class. Therefore, it was easy for teachers to organize a class with teacher-centered style and “lecture-style” (Fukuzawa, 1996, p.317).

As for teacher quality, a high level of English proficient was not necessarily required. Teachers needed to have basic grammar knowledge of English, but they were not required to have skillful conversation abilities. This is because, as previously mentioned, English Education focused on more grammar, reading, and writing skills that did not require conversational skills.

In order for English language education in Japan to become revitalized and use traditional thought as a foundation rather than a goal we believe that sociocultural theory helps us to reframe the activity of language use and teaching in Japanese classrooms as well as the general curriculum.

Improvement of the Curriculum of English Education

The curriculum council started to reconsider the curriculum and implemented the new course of study from 1998 to 2002. The council realized it was necessary for children to

catch up with globalization and English plays an important role as the common international language. According to Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2003a), the curriculum council especially realized that it was essential for children to acquire communication abilities in English to live in the twenty-first century. Although this wasn't a drastic change from their previous assertions, it is the first time that we see MEXT making such a concerted and concentrated effort in the field of English language education.

MEXT (1998) states that general purpose of education is “to help children develop their own identity and faculties from early childhood to adolescence.” It also states “school’s primary role is to motivate children to learn and teach them how to learn” (MEXT, 1998). In the course of study for lower secondary school made by MEXT, the overall objects of foreign languages (mainly English) are “to develop students’ basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, depending the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages” (MEXT, 2003b). In consideration of these overall objectives for foreign languages, there are several issues that MEXT points out to improve English Education today.

It is obvious that students need to acquire basic skills of writing, reading, listening, and speaking. However, because MEXT stresses the essential role of communication ability, speaking and listening abilities are more highlighted. We should notice that MEXT now

focuses on the actual use of English in which students will need to have when they go outside the classroom to interact with people in English, not on only grammar skill like traditional teaching style. If we are focusing on the actual use of English rather than its linguistic properties then we begin to see how sociocultural theory addresses the stated objectives of MEXT.

Moreover, MEXT (1998) stresses that through education, teachers have to help children develop ability to learn and think independently. As a result, teachers no longer have to focus on grammar and translation skills, but they need to provide useful activities for students to have opportunities to learn how to develop independently so that they can apply it to other occasions and to think about what they have just learned so that they can extend their belief, view of the world, awareness of identity as well as social and cultural awareness.

Furthermore, MEXT indicates that teachers need to deepen students' understanding from a wider perspective, enhance their awareness of being Japanese living in a global community, and cultivate a spirit of international cooperation (MEXT, 2003b). Language teachers have the responsibility to teach the English language, but they also have to foster students' self and cultural awareness through well-balanced teaching. Language teaching no longer entails just teaching a language, but it also encompasses how we address and foster our students' potential to develop as a global citizen within a local context.

MEXT not only addresses enhancing students' self and cultural awareness, but also

the strengthening the motivation for English learning (MEXT, 2003a). With higher motivation, students can develop their language knowledge and hopefully they can find their own purpose for learning English in their communities or the world.

Reframing English Language Teaching in Japan

First, since there are too many students per class and teachers cannot pay attention to each individual, MEXT now tries to “implement the 20 students per class system” (MEXT, 2001). In a small number of class structure, it is much easier for teachers and students to interact with each other. This will help schools avoid 100 % teacher-centered instruction and create more opportunities for language use during goal-oriented, classroom activities.

Second, MEXT addresses that “making use of assistant language teachers (ALTs)” whose native language is English should positively be adopted (MEXT, 2003a). MEXT has been hiring ALTs and reports that approximately 8,400 ALTs worked at public schools between 2001 and 2002. With ALTs, students have opportunities to use the actual English with native speakers of English that can cause them to have higher motivation to learn English. Also, ALTs can introduce the actual English and their cultures by cooperating with Japanese English teachers in classes and may help to motivate students who see language as more than grammar-oriented instruction.

Third, MEXT would like to upgrade the teaching abilities of English teachers (MEXT, 2003a). For example, MEXT (2002) offers domestic training for 2,000 teachers per

year and overseas trainings approximately 150 people including short- and long-term. It also establishes the targets for teachers to have: 550 points of paper TOEFL, 730 points of TOEIC. In addition, Kawamura (2004) states that MEXT would like to introduce a teacher certificate renewal system. We believe that this a crucial step in revitalizing English language education in Japan, but we also warn against creating instructors that fit only one mold. Language proficiency is crucial for all language educators, but we need not loose focus of the human aspects of education as well.

Fourth, MEXT encourages schools to connect with their local communities. For example, MEXT suggests that schools invite people who have to do with English from their local communities to introduce different perspective to students. It also encourages students “to participate in community services and various programs” (MEXT, 2001).

More importantly, MEXT emphasizes the improvement of English language ability with Japanese language ability. This concept is necessary for students because fostering students’ abilities to express themselves appropriately and understand accurately in Japanese as well as enhance their communication abilities in Japanese play important roles for them to cultivate communication abilities in English. The Japanese language is their basis of all intellectual activities. Thus, teachers have to consider the role of students’ first language and the impact of their “first culture” on learning English as well.

English Education in Japan

As MEXT tries to reform English Education, there are some changes in English classes these days. For example, since the materials made by MEXT have been improved to focus on more communicative abilities, students now have opportunities to learn better English conversational skills.

There are some improvements due to the efforts of MEXT. However, English Education would benefit from a sociocultural perspective for several reasons. That is to say, there are several challenges ahead before a true sociocultural perspective can be fully implemented in Japan.

First of all, grammar focused teaching is still popular. At the beginning of each unit, English teachers first start to teach grammar and then teach the content of the textbook. The second reason is that students still do a lot of drills, repetitions, and memorization of idioms and vocabulary. It is clear that in those processes, there is no critical thinking that fosters students' self and cultural awareness, and that students have a hard time to apply what they have learned to other situations, especially outside the classroom.

The third reason is that teacher-centered instruction still dominates. We are advocating "less teaching" by the teachers. In fact, if we return to a key of sociocultural thought, meaningful interaction, this can be accomplished by engaging students in activities. This is supported by Ohta (1995) who found that teacher-fronted instruction provided a narrower interaction potential for students' learning than peer activities.

The fourth reason is that the actual main purpose of learning English for students is still to pass entrance examinations, as opposed to the purposes of English Education by MEXT. Even though the content of the entrance examinations has been improved to include more communicative skills, students still need good grammar and analytical skills. This also caused students to lose their learning motivation and not to enjoy the process of learning English itself.

Lastly, most English teachers do not really understand the real purposes of English Education and the content of the new course of study. This last point is the driving force behind this article and is elaborated on in our final discussion.

Discussion: Linking MEXT and Sociocultural thought

By comparing the proposals of English Education by MEXT with actual English teaching, we see that the former suggests good education curriculum to foster students' English language skills, cultural and self-awareness, as well as critical thinking that shapes their view of the world, belief, learning experiences, etc. This reminds us of sociocultural theory that emphasizes mediation, thinking and speaking, ZPD, and interaction.

In order to help teachers and schools reach the goals established by MEXT then we must address five major issues.

First of all, English teachers should be aware of purposes of English teaching by MEXT and communicate with their colleagues to develop their teaching approaches toward

the ideal goals of English teaching. They are the ones who can actually transfer what MEXT has proposed to the classrooms. Their awareness of purposes of English teaching should be enhanced. A lot of trainings and discussions and introducing the sample teaching or handbook (just to get the ideas for effective teaching, not necessarily for copying) should be introduced to teachers, parents, and administrators.

Second, teachers must teach students how to learn and think independently so that they can extend their abilities later. It is important for learners to have their autonomy. Teachers have to provide students with opportunities to think and with different methods of learning (e.g., use of dictionary, summary writing, presentation, group discussion, pair work, problem solving, etc).

Third, it is essential for language learners to become motivated. By providing different topics and activities within the proposed framework students feel as if they have a choice in what they want to learn, and as Davies (2002) points out, that learner choice is key to successful language learning in a formal classroom environment. For example, in thematic learning, learners can choose more specific topics related to a particular theme. If teachers focus on more content and progress of students' learning rather than the surface (linguistic) results, students begin to feel more comfortable and get motivated.

Fourth, teachers have to be aware that it is important for them to promote learners' awareness of who they are, what they believe, and how they view the world. Language

learning should encourage them to establish their identity, their own view of the world. This helps students feel proud of themselves. Journal writing is one of good activities for this since through interaction with peers or teachers, learners have opportunities to think about themselves, their opinions about things or topics they have learned.

Last, the cultural perspective should be emphasized for English teaching. As MEXT (2003b) stresses, one of purposes of English Education is “to foster students’ awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community.” In the textbooks made by MEXT, there are many things that can facilitate students’ cultural awareness. However, the problem is that teachers do not focus on them. Facilitating cultural awareness is essential, for it also means to reflect students’ culture and themselves. To be a global person and have wider view of the world, culture has to play be an integral role of the language classroom.

Sociocultural theory plays an important role in learning because it views learning as mediation. It points out that learners should mediate what know as well as how they learned during interaction with other people. Sociocultural theory frames learning effectively because it does not focus on only learning linguistic skills, but also on the way learners learn and the process they shape their identities, perspective, social and cultural awareness.

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