

WRITING FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY OF MIND PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper reviews the studies on teaching writing from a sociocultural framework. Vygotskian Sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) has been presented as an alternative to mainstream research in second and/or foreign language learning and teaching contexts. This paper examines key elements of writing from a SCT perspective and reviews the studies on writing according to their orientations.

It groups the studies based on their research focus and addresses their limitations. Two basic limitations of the studies are (a) the vagueness in concepts and (b) (over)use of first language. Examples about these limitations are given in the study. The study closes with suggestion for further research. The main direction for further research, as argued in this study, would be the increased focus on peer collaborative writing in different phases of writing (e.g., while planning, during writing or while editing and revising) and incorporating different versions of collaborative writing and measuring their effectiveness.

Key Words: *Vygotskian Sociocultural theory, writing, peer feedback, collaborative writing.*

VYGOTSKY'NİN SOSYOKÜLTÜREL TEORİSİ BAKIŞ AÇISINDAN YAZMA ÖĞRETİMİ

Özet

Bu çalışma, Vygotsky'nin Sosyokültürel Teorisi kapsamında hazırlanmış yazma öğretimi ile ilgili çalışmalarını incelemektedir. İkinci/ yabancı dil öğrenim ve öğretim bağlamlarında, Vygotsky'nin Sosyokültürel Teorisi pek çok araştırmacı için yeni ve farklı bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Sosyokültürel Teori bakış açısıyla yazma öğretimi alanının temel öğelerini özetlemekte ve başlıca konularına göre bu çalışmaları sınıflamakta ve analiz etmektedir.

Çalışma, bu alanda belli başlı araştırmaların anahtar öğelerini kısaca özetleyerek başlamakta, daha sonra Vygotsky'den ve onun ikinci/ yabancı dil öğrenim ve öğretim alanındaki takipçilerinden (Lantolf, Wells ve diğerleri) esinlenerek hazırlanmış çalışmalarını detaylarıyla incelemektedir. Yabancı dil öğretimi alanındaki yazma öğretimi ile ilgili çalışmalar ana hatlarıyla araştırma odaklarına göre sınıflandırılmış ve bu araştırmaların genel sınırlılıkları belirtilmiştir. Bu çalışmada üzerinde durulan iki önemli sınırlılık kavramlardaki belirsizlik ve anadilin (fazlaca) kullanımınıdır. Makale, bu alanda yapılabilecek yeni çalışmalara yönelik tavsiyelerle son bulmaktadır. Temel tavsiye akranlarla işbirliğinin yazmanın tüm alanlarında yaygınlaştırılması ve işbirlikli yazmanın çeşitli türlerinin etkinlikleri üzerine yeni çalışmalar yapılmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Vygotsky'nin Sosyokültürel Teorisi, yazma, akran dönütü, işbirlikli yazma.*

Introduction

Vygotskian Sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) has been presented as an alternative to mainstream research in second and/or foreign language learning and teaching contexts, and offers a promising perspective by widening the scope of language study. Lantolf (2000) argues that the implications inspired by Vygotsky “lead to a view of learning and teaching which in many respects is very different from theories currently in favor in the mainstream second language acquisition (SLA) literature” (p. 1). Vygotskian Sociocultural theory can be defined as “Vygotsky-inspired research and its application to second and/or foreign language development processes and pedagogies... [that] offers a framework through which cognition can be systematically investigated without isolating it from its social context” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 1).

The basis of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural theory of mind is that cognitive development is socially situated and that learning is viewed as a process of internalizing social and cultural values and patterns in a given society (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, a second and/or foreign language classroom is not only an academic environment, but also it is a social context (Cazden, 2001). This paper examines the understanding of writing in second and/or foreign language teaching contexts and reports the perspectives and findings of previous research.

Key Elements of Writing

In her comprehensive study of writing instruction from a Sociocultural perspective, following Anthony and Anderson (1987), Englert (1992) discusses four key points that summarize the main theoretical and practical issues in writing instruction from a SCT perspective. The first key element is the perception of writing as a holistic cognitive activity which should not be studied in a reductionist way. Writing from this perspective consists of recursive sub-processes of planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising. Social constructivist perspective emphasizes real writing purposes and meaningful communication as the goals of writing instruction. Students are accepted as authentic writers who select their own topics and write for a range of audiences and purposes. The role of the teacher is very crucial as well. Teacher models each subprocess considering the fact that not all students are familiar with collaboration in (language) classrooms. This practice is derived from classical expert- novice relationship in Vygotskian psycholinguistics and is further developed into novice-novice scaffolding in studies conducted by sociocultural SLA scholars (e.g. Brooks & Donato, 1994; Donato, 1994; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1994; among others.)

The second key point is the argument that higher mental functioning has its origins in social life, and is mediated in dialogic interaction through symbolic tools such as language Englert (1992). In his seminal book *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978) proposes that higher cognitive processes are learned in social interactions with more knowledgeable learners who model the process and the talk about the process. This is called cognitive apprenticeship. In this process, modeling of a

teacher (or more knowledgeable peer) has a central value. Teachers model thinking and inner talk that underlies writing processes and provide students with rationales for using specific writing strategies. However, students are not the mere receptors of what is given. They participate in the process and co-construct and use the strategies with the help of the teacher. Collaborative dialogue is one of the techniques used to facilitate this process. As the students start to accomplish the tasks on their own teacher gradually relinquish the control of the strategies and dialogues to students.

Another key point is that cognitive development occurs in students' zones of proximal development (ZPD) and teachers can bridge the gap between the level of performance attained by the student in independent problem solving and the level attained in collaborative problem solving with the teacher or more knowledgeable others. The support provided by the more knowledgeable peer or the teacher which is called scaffolding might help students perform the tasks independently after some practice. Additional materials (e.g., think-sheets, guiding papers) or tools (e.g., use of L1, etc.) might be used for the purposes of scaffolding.

Knowledge construction is a social and cultural activity is the final key point highlighted by Englert (1992) in her article. She states that in writing classrooms students should write for real audiences (e.g., teachers, administrators) and for authentic purposes (e.g., to publish their opinions in classroom wallpaper, to address a current problem of their lives). Students should be given opportunities to collaborate and work together in writing activities. Emphasis is placed on meaningful communication rather than on writing mechanics or writing to complete an assignment. Instead of making a lip service of what has been previously learned, situations where students express their own opinions should be created.

Studies on writing

In second and/or foreign language learning and teaching contexts, writing from a Sociocultural theory of mind perspective has been studied in two distinct but similar ways. The first group of researchers (Ferreira & Lantolf, 2008; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Kramsch, 2000; Kern, 2000; Lantolf, 2000) viewed writing as a cultural practice and focused on how writers co-construct their texts and position themselves in writing process, and what kind of linguistic and rhetorical resources they use during this process. The role of culture and identity among elementary school and college level second/foreign language learners has been taken into consideration and explored in detail in the works of Kramsch (2000) and Maguire and Graves (2001).

This perspective is closely connected to a SCT of second language learning, and it rejects the traditional dichotomy between the individual language learner and the context of learning (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). Researchers from SCT believe that considering writing as an exclusively cognitive activity, situated within the individual learner and used mainly to impart information, is too simplistic and does not capture the complex structure of the situation. Rather they claim that writing should be viewed as a contextually situated social and cultural practice (Vollmer,

2002). Literature about writing from a SCT perspective offers plentiful evidence of personalities that employ writing to create and recreate themselves across genres, ages, language groups, and learning contexts. Second language learners utilize a variety of linguistic, textual and cultural resources while trying to make their *voices* heard (e.g., Ivanic, & Camps, 2001; Kramsch, 2000).

A second area of study on writing practice is more classroom oriented. This line of research by scholars from a Vygotskian SCT perspective follow the Vygotskian notion that cognitive development results from social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986) and mainly explore group dynamics and how group interaction (e.g., peer feedback, self vs. other regulation, scaffolding) affect writing process in second language classrooms (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; de Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998).

In their series of studies Villamil and de Guerrero (de Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998) sought to identify how social interaction and collaboration in the second language classroom could contribute to the development of writing abilities and how peer review could be utilized as an effective instructional strategy to facilitate social interaction and collaboration. Instead of a classical (typical) expert-novice relationship, they utilized a novice-novice match where both of the students helped each other to reach their ZPDs in peer review negotiations.

Likewise, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) examined the impact of first language in second language writing and how it is used as a critical psychological instrument. They argued that composing a written text in a second language classroom could be treated in the same way as any other joint activity and using a common L1 to solve the problems that arise in the process could assist in the learning of the second language.

In another study, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) aimed to describe the negotiations that occur during students' peer reviews and the ways these negotiations shape students' revision activities. They used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze their data. The authors claimed that the types of negotiations observed in the study suggested that peer reviews helped writers to focus on both local issues such as vocabulary and grammar, and more global discourse issues such as essay organization. Another important finding of the study was that 53% of peer suggestions were incorporated in revision. This percentage is quite high compared to the previous studies on peer revision (i.e. in Connor and Asenavage (1994) it was only 5 %).

In some more recent studies, researchers focused on the interplay of speaking and writing skills during the overall writing process. More specifically, another strand of research dealt with the integration of oral and written skills in the teaching of process writing to second/foreign language learners (Brooks & Swain, 2009; Mahn, 2008; Strauss, Feiz, Xiang & Ivanova, 2006). Brooks and Swain examined the mediating role of language as a semiotic tool in the development of

higher forms of mental activity. Their focus was on the construct of *linguaging* which is defined as “ the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language” (Swain, 2006, p. 89). They argued that the learner collaboration in groups or pairs promoted language learning.

In all of these studies, instead of giving some dull numbers or tables full of numbers and percentages, the researchers who follow a Vygotskian SCT perspective tried to identify the dynamics and underlying mechanisms of peer feedback, process writing and collaboration, and how students collaboratively constructed knowledge and expanded their ZPDs in the writing classrooms.

Studies on peer support (peer feedback, peer revision, peer writing) brought into attention the importance of collaboration in the writing classrooms. A Vygotskian SCT perfectly fits as a theoretical background for peer revision and collaboration in writing, and researchers presented a well-balanced combination of theory and practice in their studies.

Some Reservations about the Studies

Vagueness in concepts

After a careful investigation of studies on teaching writing from a Vygotskian SCT perspective, one can easily observe the vagueness in the labeling of the concepts and terminology. Social constructivism, collaborative learning, social-interactionist perspective, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and/or activity theory were sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the same concept or sometimes used for different concepts in previous studies. Oxford (1997) states that social constructivism and collaborative learning are treated as the same concept by most of the scholars, and further states that social constructivism is the foundation for collaborative learning in second language classroom. Specifically, Oxford argues that collaborative learning and interaction are both communicative strands that differ to some extent in classroom practice and theoretical background. When she lists the key terms for collaborative learning she includes Vygotskian SCT's key concepts such as ZPD, scaffolding, and cognitive apprenticeship among others. From all I read, it is my assumption that in different fields (SLA, teacher education, and first language education) similar concepts are labeled by different names because of either theoretical stands or practical use of the concepts which leads to vagueness on the sides of the discerning readers.

(Over)use of L1

One fair criticism for some of the studies (i.e., Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Villamil & de Guerrero 2000) that follow a SCT framework might be the overuse of L1 during peer review sessions. For example, in Villamil & de Guerrero's (2000) study, almost 95% of the interaction recorded was in the first language of the students, and more importantly use of L1 was welcomed and encouraged by the researchers. They stated that “L1 appeared as a natural crutch for conducting interactions and solving revision problems.” (p. 67) Similarly, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) has been criticized for positively encouraging the use of L1 to facilitate the

acquisition of a second language (Wells, 1998). Wells argue that “If this approach were taken to its logical conclusion, however, there would be a danger of the oral use of L2 being completely neglected” (p. 253). Regarding the (over)use of L1 in second language classrooms, Swain and Lapkin (2000) propose the following suggestion “the use of the L1 should not be prohibited in (language) classrooms, but neither should it be actively encouraged as it may substitute for, rather than support, second language learning” (p. 268). This caveat can be kept in mind in the design of future studies.

Future Research Directions

As I have stated, most of the recent research focus on the interplay of speaking and writing skills and how language is used as a mediating tool not only during the peer revision phase but also in other parts of the writing process. Swain’s (2006) construct of the languaging can be applied in different stages of collaborative writing, and the use of language as a semiotic tool can be illustrated in more detail.

Building more on collaborative writing, different techniques can be used while incorporating the peer interaction in the writing process. Ede and Lunsford (1990) list seven approaches to organization and demonstrate various manipulation that can be utilized in collaborative writing (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1: *Ede and Lunsford’s (1990) Seven Approaches to Organization in Collaborative Writing*

Pre-writing	Writing	Rewriting
The group plans and outlines.	Each member drafts a part.	Group combines the parts and revises the whole document.
The group plans and outlines. One member plans One person plans	One member drafts. and writes draft. and writes draft.	The whole group revises. The group revises. One or more persons revise(s) the draft without consulting the first writer.
The group plans	and writes draft.	One or more person(s) revise without consulting the writers.
One member assigns writing tasks	Each member performs individual task segments One person dictates.	One person combines these and revises the whole document. Another person transcribes the dictation and revises the text.

Long term effects of peer feedback and/or how peer feedback (or collaboration in writing) might help develop writing skills in general has not been addressed adequately (Brooks & Swain’s (2009) study might be a notable exception) from a Vygotskyan SCT perspective. This might be the focus of future studies which would require longitudinal analysis of writing classrooms.

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