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Introduction

Long (1983) and Vygotsky (1987) have investigated the learning process of second language learners and argued that second language learning can happen through in-class interaction and oral communication. According to Long’s (1983) Interaction Hypothesis theory, the interactional collaboration among peers can lead to second language learning. Even more, second language learners are more likely to achieve better levels of comprehension of the new input in their effort to communicate through interaction (Ellis 1999; Ellis 1998; Ellis 1995; Long 2006; Ellis 1997). In addition, according to Vygotsky’s perspective (another researcher who firstly introduced the idea of Socio-Cultural theory), collaborative assistance between an expert and a novice, or among peers can create opportunities for L2 learning (Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf and Appel 1994). Socio-cultural theory maintains that language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a psychological tool that mediates meaning between the individual and the linguistic goal and therefore assists the cognitive development process (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Anton 1999; Swain and Lapkin 1998; Lantolf 2006; Donato and McCormick 1994; Appel and Lantolf 1994).

The present essay is targeted to explore how second language learning takes place through in-class social interaction. The initial trigger for this essay lies on the Greek educational reality, where Greek EFL teachers usually follow a grammar focused teaching approach avoiding to engage the learners in informal oral communication (Karavas-Doukas 1995). Even more, it is their belief that a teacher-centered approach would be the best way to achieve second language cognitive development. Due to lack of awareness towards the way that social interaction influences the
learner’s mind and benefits the learning process, teachers refuse to apply it when they are asked to (Karavas-Doukas 1995). The aim of this essay is not to suggest that oral communication in a second language class would result in higher cognitive levels, but to argue that it constitutes another possible and effective SLA approach.

In the current essay, I first introduce the Communicative Language Teaching approach as the initial and general framework where in-class oral communication and interaction takes place. Then, after exploring the Interaction Hypothesis theory, there is an analysis of the Socio-Cultural theory and how the second language acquisition takes place within the zone of proximal development. After discussing their influence in the learning process as reported by empirical studies, I draw the conclusions of this essay and suggest further research.

Main Body

Communicative Language Teaching

The reason for introducing social interaction from the general scope of CLT is because the communicative curriculum is especially designed to reflect the learners’ needs and engage them in in-class communicative interaction (Anton, 1999). In such an instructional environment the teacher has the role of the facilitator throughout the discussions and he/she is not the only authoritarian recourse of knowledge (Nunan 1989; Nunan 1988). On the contrary, the instruction becomes teacher-centered, when the teacher avoids the authentic interaction with the learners, even though it is likely to have a positive influence to the second language learning process (Anton 1999; Savignon and Wang 2003; Van Lier 1991). As Karavas-Doukas (1995) maintains in her study, Greek EFL teachers refuse to implement the Communicative Language Teaching curriculum innovation in state schools, believing that in-class interaction would not produce the same learning results.

From the perspective of CLT, the learners as a group of independent communicators share the same responsibility of the learning that takes place through interaction, and
support each others for the purpose of reaching higher learning achievements (Anton 1999; Savignon and Wang 2003; Nunan, 1988). According to Wang (1990), the practice of in-class oral communication in EFL contexts has showed positive results concerning the Second Language Acquisition, not only for the speaking and listening tasks but also for writing and reading. In that study, conducted in China, a sample of Chinese second language learners went through a communicative based instruction. The results of the study revealed that emphasis on in-class oral communication facilitated the development of the oral skills of the learners as well as reading and writing. However, it would be necessary to further explain how the second language learning takes place during in-class oral communication by initially introducing the Interaction Hypothesis theory.

Social Interaction

Long (1983) introduced the Interaction Hypothesis theory about the role of interaction in the second language learning. According to this theory, the modified input created within interaction can be facilitating in explaining linguistic forms that learners found difficult to understand. By modified input, it is thought to mean the input that is created through interaction by the interlocutors, in order to facilitate their comprehension (Ellis 1999). According to that, a second language can be acquired by the learners through in-classroom interaction (Ellis 1999; Ellis 1998; Ellis 1995; Long 2006; Ellis 1997). Through out the process of interaction the second language learners have the possibility to create the input they need in order to better understand new information (Mackey 1999; Ellis 1999). Even more, they are likely to have more chances to receive additional input and produce new output out of it (Mackay 1999).

Long (1983), justified his theory through a study where he used a sample of sixteen non-native and sixteen native speaker pairs. He observed their oral communication during informal conversations, on their effort to explain the instructions of a game to each others. He found that even though linguistically all pairs - irrespectively of native or non-native combinations - were producing similar grammatical utterances, the native-non-native pairs in their effort to overcome the communication difficulties were
more likely to use repetitions, clarification requests, or confirmation checks (Long 1983). Interaction Hypothesis theory maintains that the collaboration between the native – non-native interlocutors, in an effort to adjust the new input to their interlocutors’ level of competence, increases the chances of comprehension. During that process of interaction, interlocutors negotiate the meaning of the new input and facilitate the learning process (Ellis 1999; Ellis 1998; Ellis 1995; Long 2006; Ellis 1997; Long 1983; Gass 1997). 

When referring to negotiation of meaning within the theoretical frame of Interaction Hypothesis, it is considered to be “the conversational exchanges that arise when interlocutors seek to prevent a communicative impasse occurring or to remedy an actual impasse that has arisen” (Ellis 1999:3). Moreover, Long (1983) supports that during negotiation of meaning, interlocutors modify their conversation, recruiting strategies such as comprehension and clarification checks and comprehension requests in order to facilitate communication and understanding of the new input, without being aware of their intention (incidental acquisition). Ellis (1998:46) further explains the idea of negotiation of meaning by bringing to our knowledge that learners are intuitively able to modify new information during a conversation in order to facilitate their interlocutor’s comprehension. There are cases where interlocutors pretend to have understood the information negotiated, but it is more likely to signal that they still need more assistance in understanding (Ellis 1998). It is thought that through this interactional discourse, where learners negotiate the meaning of the new input and correct each others, they are more likely to reach better levels of L2 comprehension (Ellis 1998).

In the scope of what Long (1983) and Ellis (1998) have discussed, Loschky (1994) conducted a study in order to investigate how comprehensible input and interaction could influence the vocabulary acquisition. He observed three groups of British learners who were learning Japanese as their second language. In the study, the three groups were given pre-modified input, un-modified input and opportunities for negotiating input, in order to solve a task where they had to find out picture-objects based on their peers’ description. The results of the study revealed that the group
which negotiated input not only increased its possibilities for second language comprehension but showed to have more chances on that compared to the other two groups (Loschky, 1994). Even though the results concerning the negotiation input were quite encouraging, they only provided evidence of facilitating vocabulary comprehension but not acquisition.

In a later study, Mackey (Mackey 1995, cited in Gass 1997) investigated a group of second language learners during the practice of communicative tasks where they were engaged in targeted structure questions and were encouraged to interactively participate in a conversation with their peers. Mackey found that learners who received not only pre-modified input but also opportunities for informal interaction were more likely to develop through the structure-focused interaction. Even more, interaction seemed to help the learners to achieve a higher frequency of development, but on the other hand was not able to surpass the learners’ developmental stages. That supports Gass’s (1997) argument that interaction serves as a first step of cognitive development where the learners are assisted in focusing their attention to the new input according to the targeting structure of the lesson. Interaction enables the learners to better comprehend the new information before they move to the next stage of acquiring the new input (Gass, 1997). Thus, as Mackey found out in her study, learners needed time before they were able to move to the next developmental stage (Mackey 1995, cited in Gass 1997). Moreover, the negotiation of meaning that took place through interaction was giving the learners valuable time for their development (Mackey 1995, cited in Gass 1997).

Socio-Cultural Theory

An alternate way of addressing in-class social interaction would be from the scope of Vygotsky’s Socio-Cultural Theory which also maintains that in-class interaction and participation increase the learning opportunities in a second language learning environment (Van Lier 1991; Donato and McCormick 1994; Anton 1999; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf, 2006). Furthermore, analyzing the learning process of the mind from the perspective of using language as a mediation
tool for communication, could possibly unravel the importance of communication and interaction within the Greek EFL context as well.

The Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, along with other more recent sociological researchers, is the main representative of the Socio-Cultural Theory, which firstly appeared in the late seventies. According to Vygotsky’s theory, learning takes place through the method of ‘genetic explanation’, where all the physical actions are processed by the human brain through their analysis from the perspective of their cultural variables (Donato and McCormick 1994). For instance, according to the theory of mind, we are able to understand the learning strategies only by culturally analyzing and examining the EFL classroom. In addition, the focus of this theory is shifted from the observation of the individual learner as a solitary actor of the learning process, to the classroom as a group of learners interacting and mediating information (Donato and McCormick 1994).

A significant area of inquiry in the socio-cultural theory of mind is about the ways that language functions as a mediation tool in the learning process (Anton 1999; Lantolf 1994; Appel and Lantolf 1994). According to that, Vygotsky’s theory maintains that when humans are trying to communicate, they recruit symbols or sings as tools in order to mediate meaning and therefore humans are viewed as social mediating beings (Lantolf 2006; Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Appel and Lantolf 1994). Vygotsky argued that humans, in an effort to control nature, invented tools that allow them to collaborate with other individuals in order to achieve their goals (Lantolf and Appel 1994). Those tools are actually created for the purpose of mediating between the human social and mental activity and therefore reflect the social and cultural background of the learners (Lantolf 2000; Appel and Lantolf 1994). Even more, the tools serve the purpose of mediators between the individual and its purpose (Lantolf and Appel 1994). In addition, Vygotsky supports that in terms of social communication and interaction, language itself comprises a symbolic tool whose role is to mediate the human consciousness, so that humans are able to change and develop their mental activities and performance (Lantolf and Appel 1994). From that same perspective, learning also comprises a mediated process where the learners through interaction and discussion, use the language in order to
mediate their cognitive development and control the mental tools (Mitchell and Myles 2004)

From the Vygotskian perspective, language is viewed not only as a mechanism for social communication but as a psychological tool as well (Swain and Lapkin 1998). As a tool, it serves for the purpose of mediating between the interlocutor and the solution of a task, facilitating the individual in achieving their goal. Based on the token that cognitive development is achieved through a dialogic procedure, social interaction can create the appropriate conditions for problem solving and mediation between the interlocutors (Swain and Lapkin 1998). Furthermore, social interaction serves as a developmental tool for the learner, where the participants of an oral discourse create their strategies in order to assist each others in solving a problem and achieving the desired knowledge (Lantolf and Appell 1994). In that procedure, the participants who have unequal level of knowledge support each others in order to enhance their competence and internalize the knowledge received by a more expert individual (Lantolf and Apple 1994: 37). Through the process of internalization the learner is likely to develop cognitively by “deposing” the language depicted with the assistance of another interlocutor and use it later for his own purposes (Swain and Lapkin 1998).

Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

According to Lantolf (2000:80), Vygotsky’s goal was to follow the so called ‘genetic method’ in order to find out how cultural and societal factors influence the function of the human social and mental activity and in such way to explore the mediated control of individuals. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning comprises a ‘social and intermental activity’ which can lead to the individual’s cognitive development (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). According to Lantolf and Appel (1994:9), cognitive development initiates from the willingness of the individual for learning and is symbolically mediated through socio-cultural activities and signs. Therefore, he argues that initially the individual strongly dependant to other people-such as family, is introduced to their socio-cultural environment mostly through language and later on is more capable in using the symbolic tools that could help him through the cognitive
development. The individual learns how to communicate through the guidance of adults which is expressed through the dialogue, interaction and discussion. In such way the child and later on, the learner is receiving support by experts in the learning process (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Lantolf 2000). Even more, Vygotsky in his theory of mind has maintained a distinction between the child’s current level of development and its potential level that could be achieved through the interactive guidance and support of an expert (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Lantolf 2000).

Socio-Cultural theory maintains that the child as a solitary individual has the ability to perform a number of different tasks and achieve a certain cognitive level, but on the other hand, they are not able to reach the same level as when they are under the guidance of another expert individual (Lantolf and Appel 1994). The potential of a novice learner in shifting from their actual level of development to a higher cognitive level under the guidance of an expert is what Vygotsky named as the Zone of Proximal Development (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Anton 1999; Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf 2000; Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994; Lantolf 1994). More specifically, ZPD refers to:

The distance between the actual developmental 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 more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1987: 86)

The role of the ZPD is not to simply create a scaffolding relationship between the expert and the novice for the purpose of task completion, but to lead the novice to the highest possible cognitive levels through interaction (Lantolf and Appel 1994). Through this process of scaffolded interaction, the novice is able to constantly develop under the assistance of the expert (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Anton 1999; Mitchell and Myles 2004). According to the Vygotskian perspective, through the scaffolding that takes place within the ZPD, the learner is experiencing a ‘microgenesis’ in their second language system as the expert brings in the appropriate input to the novice (Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf and Appel 1994). So each time that interaction takes place, the expert has a little more information to
provide to the novice-learner, assisting to their cognitive development through a more 'natural' way. That is also a key point where the Socio-Cultural Theory differentiates from Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis. According to the latter, emphasis is given to the linguistic input that through psycholinguistic processes systematically affects the learner’s second language system (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Thus, from the frame of the Input Hypothesis Theory then, the learner is supposed to learn through a process of modified formal interaction and not through the formal or informal natural communication and collaboration between the expert and the novice (Mitchell and Myles 2004; Lantolf and Appel 1994).

Socio-cultural theory supports that social interaction between individuals is responsible for their cognitive development (Lantolf and Appel; 1994). Contrasting to that, there are theorists who argue that within the in-class interaction opportunities for real world interactions are largely diminished because of the lessons that are usually goal-oriented (Lantolf and Appel 1994). However, scaffolding still remains a powerful means to interactive cognitive development through the symbolic mediation of meaning (Lantolf and Appel 1994: 36-37). Hence, even though in-class interaction could be controlled, the learners are still able to engage and contribute to the learning process.

Relative to that is the study conducted by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994). Their study observed the development potentials of a group of adult English as second language learners for eight weeks, in one-to-one lessons. During that period the tutor was aimed to provide scaffolding assistance to the learner in order for the latter to eventually actively engage in the learning process. The researchers created a “ regulatory scale” presenting the shifting from the explicit scaffolding of the tutor, to more implicit levels. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) reported that a shifting was observed from explicit scaffolding (other-regulation) to more implicit (self-regulation). During that shifting to higher self-regulation levels, the learners became more self-dependent during the learning process. These findings, according to the researchers, were revealing an existent micro-genetic development between the novice and the expert (Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994). More importantly, the researchers maintained that:
…linguistic forms alone do not provide us with the full picture of a learner’s developmental level. It is essential to know the degree to which other-regulation, or mediation, impacts on the learner’s production of the particular forms. (Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994:480)

In addition, more recent researchers support the idea that interaction within the zone of proximal development can also take place among peers, in a group or pair activity, where the peers will have the chance to collaborate (Mitchell and Myles 2004). Nassaji and Swain (2000), Wells (1999), Lantolf (2000) and Swain et al. (2002) have maintained that the cognitive development and the learning process within the ZPD does not necessarily require an interactive discourse between the teacher and the learner, but it can also be achieved through the collaboration and learning assistance among peers. Therefore, the scaffolding, that takes place during the oral second language production when the learners are trying to solve a problem, is likely to lead to the learners’ cognitive development (Mitchell and Myles 2004). Studies have shown that the micro-genesis within the ZPD is responsible not only for the enhancement of the speaking and listening skills, but also for grammar and vocabulary as well (Mitchell and Myles 2004).

As mentioned previously, scaffolding is a mechanism that takes place within the scope of the ZPD, in order to assist the learners to their micro-genetic development. More specifically, when referring to scaffolding, it is thought to be a term created by the more recent socio-cultural researchers, who tried to capture the way that learning takes place within the ZPD. Based on that, scaffolding comprises a metaphor for the assistance shared among the interlocutors of an oral discourse, which is supposed to lead the learners to the cognitive development (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). According to Mitchell and Myles (2004:210), there are studies that have shown in the past that the student-teacher (novice-expert) scaffolding interaction within the ZPD can create second language development. Raising awareness of the Greek EFL teachers towards the beneficial role of social interaction within the EFL classroom might have a positive influence over their teaching beliefs and methodologies.
The idea of scaffolding maintains that learners and in particular second language learners are able to support each others in achieving a higher cognitive level through social interaction. Based on that, the socio-cultural theorists have formed six main characteristics of scaffolding: a) recruiting interest in the task, b) simplifying the task, c) maintaining pursuit of the goal, d) marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution, e) controlling frustration during problem solving, and f) demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Mitchell and Myles 2004; Anton 1999). It is thought that through the inter-psychological mechanisms of scaffolding, the learners are in the position of internalizing the knowledge that they co-constructed through a collaborative activity (Lantolf and Appel 1994; Mitchell and Myles 2004). Hence, from the socio-cultural perspective, the learners are able to engage in the learning process through interaction and collaboration for the purpose of cognitive development and therefore to internalize new knowledge.

Supporting evidence to this idea is also provided by Anton (1999) who investigated a learner-centered SLL class and a traditional SLL teacher-centered class in an effort to articulate the mechanisms of scaffolding and the benefits of in-class interaction for the grammar instruction. She apparently came up with the conclusions that the L2 learners had seriously more opportunities for receiving scaffolding through the collaborative environment than in the teacher-centered teaching approach. Further to Anton’s (1999) study, Swain and Lapkin (1998) investigated a number of studies related to the cognitive development in the scope of in-class interaction and collaboration. Their aim was to articulate the function of language as a communicative tool as well as a cognitive developmental tool. They concluded that language indeed serves as a tool for social communication, but their study also provided evidence that it engages the learners to the second language cognitive development processes.

The aforementioned conclusion complements Anton’s (1999) study, by adding to her report that in-class interaction increases the opportunities of scaffolding as a facilitating mechanism to cognitive development. Even more, the results of the particular study provide empirical support to what other socio-cultural researchers
have maintained about the collaboration among peers (Mitchell and Myles 2004). The study revealed that L2 learners were able to scaffold each others to the point of reaching cognitive levels that none of them alone could have (Swain and Lapkin 1998). Thus, the scaffolding derived from an expert, proved as necessary as the collaboration among a group of peers. Even more, interaction between a pair of L2 learners of the same cognitive level could provide the appropriate scaffolding that would lead to L2 cognitive development (Swain and Lapkin 1998).

Conclusion

The current essay arises from by the deficiency of Greek EFL teachers to implement the Communicative Language Teaching curriculum in the public schools and their refusal to create opportunities for in-class interaction. In an attempt to suggest that strict grammar-focused instruction is not the only effective way of addressing second language acquisition, it initially explores the Interaction Hypothesis Theory. According to Long (1983) who first introduced this theory, through in-class interaction second language learners have the chance to negotiate meaning and improve their comprehension of new information. During that process interlocutors are able to take the necessary time to modify the new input and adjust it to their cognitive level (Mackey 1995, cited in Gass 1997).

Vygotsky (1987) with his Socio-Cultural Theory addressed interaction from a more psychological perspective, by maintaining that second language learning is a mediation process where language serves as the mediation tool of the human consciousness. According to that there is a zone of proximal development, where the learners can achieve a micro-genetic development through collaborative scaffolding (Lantolf and Appel 1994). Even though it could not be asserted that interaction is the best method to achieve cognitive development, based on the aforementioned studies it is thought that interaction facilitates the learner in the comprehension of new input. I hope that the present essay will be of interest to the Greek EFL teachers and will provide them with the basic knowledge concerning interaction and SLA. It could also be the trigger for further investigation of implementing in-class oral-communication
and interaction in the Greek private EFL schools, where teachers and learners are usually less reluctant in applying new methodologies.

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Bibliography


